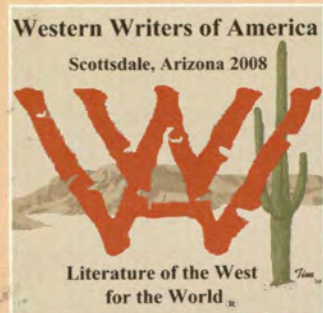


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Western Writers of America ROUNDUP

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Western Writers of America ROUNDUP®

M A G A Z I N E

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Owen Wister Award Winner: Tony Hillerman

By Johnny D. Boggs

There's no mystery surrounding Tony Hillerman's success.

He could have remained a journalist, but he didn't. He could have stuck to writing nonfiction, but he didn't. He could have given up on his dreams, but he didn't. And he could have listened to his literary agent, the one who told him that if he wanted to get his first novel published, he had to "get rid of all that Indian stuff."

He didn't do that either.

No, Hillerman kept the faith, stayed true to his vision and the people he wanted to write about, and through good luck, persistence, and a strong work ethic — not to mention outstanding storytelling skills — he has become an international success story, an award-winning novelist, and this year's recipient of Western Writers of America's Owen Wister Award for lifetime contributions to literature about the American West.

Born on May 27, 1925, Hillerman grew up in the small town of Sacred Heart, Oklahoma. His father tried to farm and ran a small grocery store. His mother was a former nurse. "We were poor," he recalls while sitting in his home office in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "Of course, nobody knew they were poor. Everybody was poor."

He thought he wanted to be a chemical engineer, and when his family raised enough money to send one of their sons to college, Hillerman went to the University of Oklahoma, working several part-time jobs so he'd have enough money to pay tuition for the next semester — if he lasted that long.

"I got kicked out of algebra," he says. "I kept going to sleep in class. I fell out of the chair one day because

I had so many jobs, and I was in bad shape in another course. Had an A in English, of course, although the teacher had me come in [to] teach me how to spell. So thank God the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. New possibilities opened."

Serving in the 103rd Infantry Division, he came away with a Purple Heart, the Bronze Star, and the Silver Star. In France, near the German border, he was seriously wounded while on a reconnaissance mission.

"I got blown up in a barnyard," he remembers.

Most people wouldn't think of two broken legs, almost permanent blindness, and having his left foot rebuilt ("I still have to buy shoes two different sizes.") as a blessing, but Hillerman says it was while he was recovering from those severe injuries in a French hospital that he began toying with the idea of writing.

"I knew I didn't want to farm. I started thinking that maybe I'd like to write, and I started writing a short story in my mind. It wasn't very good. In fact, it's pretty bad, but I finally put it on paper, got it published, and that encouraged me."

Also encouraged by a reporter at the *Daily Oklahoman* after he returned to the States and was discharged from the Army, Hillerman re-entered the University of Oklahoma and studied journalism.

There was also another significant event, although he didn't know it at the time, that would affect him.

He met a girl at a USO dance, and a short while later he was on a road trip with her and her father, who needed

someone to help him haul equipment to a wildcat oil well he had drilled on a New Mexico reservation.

"I didn't have a driver's license, never had one, had a patch over my left eye, but her dad drove the big truck and I followed in a smaller one with his red-haired daughter sitting beside me," Hillerman says. "Along about Crownpoint, we pulled off the main highway on a dirt road, and coming out of the hills was a whole column of Navajos. I was used to Indians, but these guys were really dressed up, all on horses, men and women, and we stopped to let them go. When we got to the ranch, I asked the rancher about those Navajos. He said some of the boys had just got back from the Marine Corps and they're having an Enemy Way ceremony, a curing ceremony. I said, 'Boy, I'd like to see that.' He said if you stay sober and mind yourself, it would be all right."

"They weren't curing bullet wounds or broken bones. The whole point was to teach them to get rid of their bad memories, their anger, hatred, indignation for way they'd been treated, been shot at, just to get them back in what they call Hozjo, harmony with the world. I thought, 'Boy, that's wonderful. That's the way it ought to be.'"

In 1948 — the same year he married Marie Unzner (not the redhead he had traveled with to New Mexico) — Hillerman graduated from the University of Oklahoma and began his career as a newspaper reporter. He started out on the police beat at the *Borger News Herald* in the Texas Panhandle — he later modeled the character of Joe Leaphorn after a county sheriff — then took a job at the *Morning Press-Constitution* in Lawton, Oklahoma, and eventually covered politics for United Press in



Oklahoma City. Next came a job managing the United Press bureau in Santa Fe, New Mexico, followed by a stint as editor at the Santa Fe *New Mexican*.

Yet all the while, he wanted to write fiction.

"Marie kept reminding me," Hillerman says. "It was a seven-days-a-week job, and she said if I really wanted to do this I needed to find another job where I'd have time to write."

In 1963, Hillerman took a position at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. "I don't know exactly what you'd call the job," says Hillerman, who taught journalism, worked on his master's degree, and served as university president Tom Popejoy's "doer of

undignified deeds."

Hillerman was also writing nonfiction essays and articles for magazines, and he began working on a novel, calling back those experiences he remembered from his first encounter with the Navajo.

"It took forever to write," Hillerman recalls. "I worked on it for more than a year, selling nonfiction to magazines through my agent. You're not very important to agents unless you've sold a lot of books. Anyway, I sent her the book, didn't hear back from her, finally called her, and she said, 'Tony, I don't think you're ever going to get that book published.' I said that I wanted to do some rewriting, and she said, 'Why don't you go back and write nonfic-

tion?' I said I wanted to write a novel. She said, 'Well, the first thing you've got to do is get rid of all that Indian stuff.'"

Hillerman rejected that advice. Eventually, he sent the manuscript to an editor at Harper and Row, and, after a few revisions, *The Blessing Way* was published in 1970, earning an Edgar Award nomination from Mystery Writers of America as Best First Novel. Hillerman followed that with another mystery, *The Fly on the Wall* (an Edgar finalist), in which he relied heavily on his days as a political reporter, but something started eating him about *The Blessing Way*. The hero of that first novel is professor Bergen McKee,

who gets some timely assistance from a Navajo Tribal Policeman named Joe Leaphorn. For his next book, Hillerman decided to bring Joe Leaphorn back and make him the main character.

"I liked that guy," Hillerman says.

Dance Hall of the Dead was published in 1973, earning the Edgar Award and a movie option that never panned out. *Listening Woman*, another Edgar finalist, came in 1978, and then Hillerman decided he needed another policeman, a younger cop, and so Jim

Chee was created for *People of Darkness* (1980). In 1986, after two other Chee novels (*The Dark Wind* in 1982 and *The Ghostway* in 1984), Hillerman decided to bring Leaphorn and Chee together. *Skinwalkers* won the Spur Award, and Chee and Leaphorn have been working together, directly or indirectly, ever since. The next novel, *A Thief of Time* in 1988, not only earned Hillerman an Edgar nomination but also served as Hillerman's breakout novel, and many consider it his finest piece of fiction.

He retired from the University of New Mexico in 1987 and kept writing successful, best-selling mysteries: *Talking God*, *Coyote Waits*, *Sacred Clowns*, *The Fallen Man*, *The First Eagle*, *Hunting Badger*, *The Wailing Wind*, *The Sinister Pig*, *Skeleton Man*. Mystery Writers of America presented him the Grand Master Award in 1991, and Hillerman took his second Spur in 2007 for *The Shape Shifter*.

"Growing up with Indians in Oklahoma, I knew how they are," he says. "In the first place, you don't want

Western Writers on Hillerman

"Tony Hillerman is truly a national treasure, bringing all of us wonderful stories of the modern West, while giving us memorable glimpses of the distinctive ways of the Navajo Nation. Western Writers of America is proud to present him with the Owen Wister award for lifetime achievement." — WWA President Cotton Smith

"Tony Hillerman is my favorite for pure pleasure reading. He whisks the reader along on a joy ride over the Navajo country, giving us a dose of Indian mysticism while we puzzle over who did it and why." — Seven-time Spur Award-winner Elmer Kelton

"Tony Hillerman created a new kind of genre — contemporary Western crime novels about culture, place, and character — that built the bridge from the old to the new so many of us have now crossed over. He was the first writer I can recall hearing normal people actually talking about. I remember one couple telling me that they read his books aloud while they drove through New Mexico. That's the kind of impact his work has had on the reading public. Tony Hillerman started it all, and his kindness and generosity toward newbies like me will never be forgotten." — C.J. Box, author of *Free Fire* and *Blue Heaven*

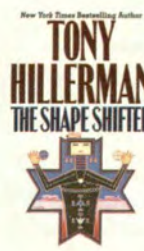
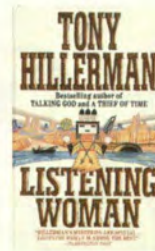
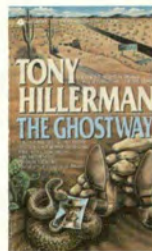
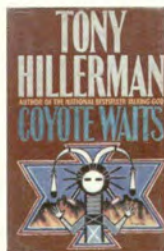
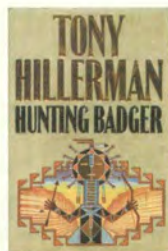
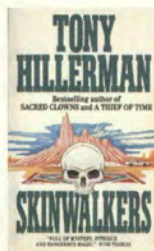
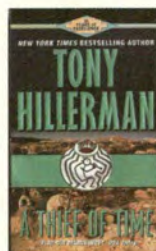
"Tony Hillerman excels at what good Western writing should do. His knowledge of the place, setting, and customs is so thorough that he takes us to the land with him, and he makes Leaphorn and Chee people we think we know, so that we keep coming back to read more of their stories. Best of all, he successfully combines Western

writing with the mystery genre — not an easy trick. I wish I could do it one-eighth as well as he does. My congratulations on an honor long overdue." — Owen Wister Award recipient Judy Alter

"Tony's body of work informs us that truly masterful storytelling crosses all boundaries and breaks new ground. His novels are a unique fusion of popular literary genres that shattered the old stereotype of the traditional mystery novel. Newcomers will be cutting his trail for generations to come. He deserves every award and honor that comes his way." — Michael McGarrity, author of *The Big Gamble* and *Death Song*

"I have three reasons for admiring Tony Hillerman as a standout, stand-alone, standup writer. One: I like his Lt. Leaphorn and Sgt. Chee mysteries. (Standout). Two: Reports are that the Navajos and Hopis respect him for his depiction of them and their culture. (Stand-alone). Three: When I wrote him to ask for a comment for the cover of *Ghost Warrior*, he sent a very nice quote. (Standup)." — Lucia St. Clair Robson, author of *Ride the Wind* and *Ghost Warrior*

"Tony Hillerman is the most modest and unassuming superstar you'll ever meet. All the well-deserved hype that's been heaped upon his impressive body of work originated not with him or his publicists, but with those readers who struggle through the long nuclear winter waiting for his next book. His deep reverence for history and culture and his balanced approach have played a major part in dragging the Old West into the new millennium; and just between you, me, and his millions of readers, he's also a crackling good storyteller." — Five-time Spur Award-winner Loren D. Estleman



them thinking you think they're absurd or odd. You let them know you're really interested, as I really was, and before long, I could ask them about taboos, holy people. I got acquainted with a couple of archaeologists, and the basement of the [university] library had rows and rows of papers of sociologists, anthropologists, writings about all sorts of stuff, describing

sweat lodges, various types of initiations, taboos, and inhibitions. I spent many a night and many hours reading those, and then I'd ask the Navajos about it.

"I got called on mistakes in my novels, like when I'd mention a guy getting off interstate so-and-so and turning right to go to Gallup when he should have turned left, stuff like

that, but the religious stuff, I was very careful with that and the Hopis, too, and the Zunis, and anybody else I ran across."

He doesn't write from an outline, "except in my mind," he says, but comes up with a basic idea — including a crime, of course — and then begins an intensive research phase, talking to Na-

HILLERMAN (continued on page 27)

Tony Hillerman's West

"I won't tell," Horseman said. His voice was loud, rising almost to a scream. And then he turned and ran, ran frantically down the dry wash which drained away from the prairie dog colony. And behind him he heard the Wolf laughing. — *The Blessing Way*, 1970

Being lost was a new and unpleasant experience for Bernie. In the "Land Between the Sacred Mountains" of her Navajos, she knew the landscape by heart. Look east, the Turquoise Mountain rose against the sky. To the west, the Chuska Range formed the horizon. Beyond that the San Francisco Peaks were the landmark. South, the Zuni Mountains. North, the La Platas. No need for a compass. No need for a map. But down here along the Mexican border all the mountains looked alike to her — dry, saw-toothed, and unfriendly. — *The Sinister Pig*, 2003

With the last rocks removed, Chee squatted in the low opening and looked at what remained. The skeleton was still wearing moccasins, put on the wrong feet to confuse any chindi that might follow the spirit into the darkness of the afterworld. — *The People of Darkness*, 1980

Black Mesa is neither black nor a mesa. It is far too large for that definition — a vast, broken plateau about the size and shape of Connecticut. It is virtually roadless, almost waterless, and uninhabited except for an isolated scattering of summer herding camps. — *The Dark Wind*, 1982

Thunderheads had merged over the Carrizo range, forming a blue-black wall that extended westward far into Arizona. The afternoon sun lit their tops, already towering high enough to be blowing ice crystals into the jet stream winds. By the time he turned south beyond Dennehotso across Greasewood Flats, he was driving in cloud shadow. — *Skinwalkers*, 1986

"Have you realized how lucky you are to have been brought to the only café in Shiprock with napkins?" — *A Thief of Time*, 1988

But now, standing on the flat stone roof of Yells Back Butte, he looked westward and saw the immense sky, the line of thunderheads building over the Coconino Rim, the sunlight reflecting off the Vermillion Cliffs below the Utah border, and the towering cauliflower shape of the storm already delivering a rain blessing upon the San Francisco Peaks, the Sacred Mountain marking the western margin of his people's holy land. — *The First Eagle*, 1998

Emma was a true Navajo traditional with the traditional's need to greet the new day. That was one of the countless reasons Leaphorn loved her. Besides, while Leaphorn was no longer truly a traditional, no longer offered a pinch of pollen to the rising sun, he still treasured the old ways of his people. — *Hunting Badger*, 1999

TNT movie in 1999. These films were hardly in the league with *Lonesome Dove*, *Tombstone*, and *3:10 To Yuma*. But the film rights were purchased and production completed — you guessed it — in years when the media dwelled ad nauseam on the Death of the Western.

By now, you may be thinking this article is a gratuitous trip down memory lane. Nothing could be farther off the mark. For thirty-nine years I have listened to the media and shortsighted publishers bong the death knell of the Western. They were wrong in 1969 and they are just as wrong in 2008. They are false prophets in a distant land and it's called New York City. A man of some wisdom once said to me, "Publishers think the only thing between the Hudson River and the West Coast is a five hour plane ride." Sad to say, for many publishers, the comment holds true even today.

So now I've told you a story, and here's what thirty-nine years as a wordsmith have taught me. None of us should ever give a hoot in hell about the naysayers and the doomsday crowd. Writers who have a love affair with the defining moment in our national consciousness will always write about the West. We are, after all, the gatekeepers of the legacy.

Trust in yourself and take my word for it. The Western will never die.

HILLERMAN (from page 15)

vajos, archaeologists, anthropologists, reading, reading, and reading more.

His favorite part of writing?

"It's when you've worked your way through a problem and you turn on the computer and start writing and the words just flow out, and, sure enough, you know it's going to work. I like that."

And he offers this advice for any writer just starting out.

"I did a book-signing years back in California with (Elmore Leonard), and he owed his success to cutting out all the stuff nobody reads. But me? That's what I write, so I think it's great to set

your story in some spectacular country where, when there's not much happening with your characters or plot, you can always write about what your characters are seeing."

In between *The Blessing Way* and *The Shape Shifter*, he has written essays, articles, introductions, even a children's book (*The Boy Who Made Dragonfly: A Zuni Myth*) and a memoir (*Seldom Disappointed*), not to mention a non-Southwestern mystery, *Finding Moon*. A collection of his nonfiction, *The Great Taos Bank Robber*, was first published in 1973. He has seen his works brought to the screen, such as on PBS' *Mystery!* se-

ries, still consistently hits the best-seller lists, and is toying with a few nonfiction assignments and maybe another Leaphorn-Chee mystery.

All in all, the past eighty-two years have been a wonderful run.

"They've been far better than anyone deserves," he writes in his memoir, "two thirds of them brightened with Marie ... notable for fortunate outcomes and rare disappointments."

Three-time Spur Award winner Johnny D. Boggs takes over as WWA president in June.



Devon Dawson
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