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1976 - 1977 SEMI-ANNUAL MEETING

At the 1976 annual meeting of LEHI, the membership voted to have only two scheduled meetings per year: an annual meeting in July and a semi-annual meeting in January. Therefore, the quarterly meeting previously scheduled for November 19, 1976, at Odessa College has been re-scheduled as follows:

Semi-Annual Meeting (Saturday, January 22, 1977), Odessa College, Museum —
Deaderick Hall, Andrews Highway, Odessa, Texas, commencing 2 p.m.

All members of LEHI are cordially invited to attend all meetings of the corporation.

Dr. Donald W. Whisenhunt, President

Tony Hillerman's "Dance Hall of The Dead"

By Jim Harris

Hobbs, New Mexico

In a question and answer session with some college students, Tony Hillerman responded to a query about him being white and writing about Indians. I grew up with Indians, he said, and when you realize we are all alike, then there's no problem in writing about anyone.

Hillerman's statement does not reflect what appears to be the novelist's intense interest in those customs and traditions of his Indian brothers that make life in the Southwest unique and absorbing. Hillerman has written two novels that deal with Indian life in the four corners area where Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico come together. *The Blessing Way*, 1970, and *Dance Hall of the Dead*, 1973, indirectly explore Navajo and Zuni life on the reservations of those tribes. (He also has a book of essays and anecdotes, *The Great Taos Bank Robbery*, and a children's book, *The Boy Who Made Dragonfly*, which deal with the New Mexican Southwest; *The Fly On The Wall* is a novel of journalistic intrigue.)

Hillerman's two Southwestern novels are detective stories with the same detective, Joe Leaphorn, appearing in both books. But both works are not just detective stories. The novels offer much insight into the folklore of Southwestern Indians. Especially in the latter book, *Dance Hall of the Dead*, Hillerman gleans much from the Navajo consciousness with his detective and much from the Zuni kachina ceremonies and rituals that dominate the plot. In addition, *Dance Hall of the Dead* weds setting with plot in a manner reminiscent



of the finest of Southwestern fiction—Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Richter's *The Sea of Grass*, McMurtry's *Horseman Pass By*, and Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*.

Dance Hall of the Dead resembles the traditional detective story in several ways. More specifically the book resembles the American contribution to this genre, the hard-boiled detective story. Joe Leaphorn, the protagonist of *Dance Hall*, shares much with Chandler's Marlowe and McDonald's Archer. He is tough; he finds himself in many scrapes; he operates alone; he is pessimistic; and he takes his knowledge from hard-nosed experience.

The story covers a week, from Sunday afternoon to the following Sunday morning, with Leaphorn on a case involving two Indian boys. George Bowlegs (a Navajo who wants to be Zuni) and Ernesto Cata (a Zuni) are reported missing. Blood is found and Bowlegs is suspected of killing his friend. In the course of the investigation, Leaphorn visits a hippie commune near Zuni Pueblo, the Bowlegs' hogan where he finds George's father slain, an anthropological dig where scientists search for clues of ancient man, and a lake that is the home of some Zuni gods known as kachinas. With each visit Leaphorn learns more about the case and is on his way to discovering who killed Cata—his body is found on Monday—and finding George Bowlegs.

Much of the plot follows the typical hard-boiled detective story. But Hillerman's book has many differences and innovations. The most obvious difference is in his treatment of point of view. Most hard-boiled novels are told from one point of view; usually the reader sees all through the detective's eyes. Hillerman shifts point of view. Chapter one is seen from the eyes of Ernesto Cata, the boy who is about to be murdered. (*The Blessing Way* also begins within the consciousness of the victim-to-be.) By beginning this way, Hillerman has the advantage of causing the reader to sympathize with the young boy-victim, giving the reader a clue as to who the murderer is, and starting the novel with the intensity and excitement found in the best of hard-boiled, or whodunnit, stories.

Two passages from the first chapter will illustrate Hillerman's effective use of point of view. The first sentence of the novel describes Ernesto without naming him: "Shulawitsi, the Little Fire God, member of the Council of the Gods and Deputy to the Sun, he taped his track shoes to his feet."² Cata is a curious mixture of the ancient and the modern, a kachina in track shoes. Combined with the intensity of Cata's concentration on the running ritual, the traditional-contemporary character intrigues and engages the reader. The novel begins with the reader engrossed with character rather than plot, the traditional detective story usually emphasizing the latter. That concentration on Ernesto lasts but a few paragraphs, however. At the end of

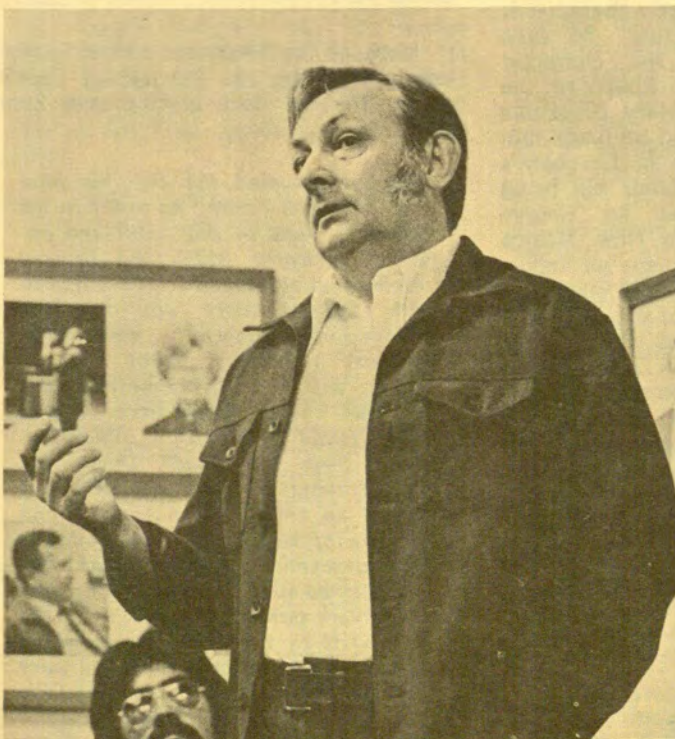
the chapter, Ernesto's doom is foretold: at the end of his practice run, he encounters the masked god Salamobia, and

The Fire God saw then that the wand rising in the hand of this Salamobia was not of woven yucca. It glittered in the red light of the twilight. And he remembered that Salamobia, like all of the ancestor spirits which lived at the Zuni masks, were visible only to members of the Sorcery Fraternity, and to those about to die. [p 4]

The point of view in chapter one, then functions to introduce characters, conflicts, and motifs used throughout the book.

The second chapter of *Dance Hall of the Dead* serves as a good introduction to Hillerman's style. The novelist is also a journalist, and his newspaper experience shows in the short, simple declarative sentences. The chapter begins, "Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn was watching the fly." (p. 5) Leaphorn sits in the Zuni police station learning of the disappearance of Cata and Bowlegs. When he and the other policemen speak to each other the reader is introduced to the dialogue that distinguishes much of the work. An excerpt from the middle of the conversation exemplifies much of Hillerman's dialogue in the book:

"I don't think it got typed up there in the report, but the kids said



Novelist Hillerman takes a leave from the University of New Mexico to talk with students in Hobbs and at New Mexico Junior College in May, 1976. Along with John Bakas, also from UNM, Hillerman discussed his work as newsman, teacher, and writer. Students seemed particularly interested in his belief that extensive reading is the key to good writing.

Photographs Courtesy Rosalie Newsome,
Director of College Information, NMJC

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Bowlegs was looking for Cata when he got to school, asking where he was and all," Pasquaanti said.

"That could have been part of the act," Leaphorn said. He was glad to find he was thinking like a cop again.

"I guess so," Pasquaanti said. "But remember he's just fourteen years old."

Leaphorn tapped the page. "It says here that Cata had gone out to run. What was it? Track team or something?"

The silence last maybe three seconds — long enough to tell Leaphorn the answer wouldn't be track team. It would be something to do with the Zuni religion....

"This Cata boy had been selected to have a part in the religious ceremonies this year," Pasquaanti said. "Some of those ceremonies last for hours, the dancing is hard, and you have to be in condition. He was running every evening to keep in condition."

Although Hillerman does not use dialogue to the extent that many hard-boiled detective writers use it, several crucial passages in the plot are dealt with in dialogue. When Leaphorn learns the most about Zuni religion, for example, the information comes in a conversation with a priest, Father Ingles.

Hillerman's treatment of Joe Leaphorn is in the best tradition of the Hammet or Chandler detective. The most obvious difference between the traditional hard-boiled detective and Leaphorn is that Hillerman's character is a policeman, "Navajo fuzz" he calls himself once. Having the character Navajo puts back into Leaphorn the private eye's air of mystery Hillerman would have sacrificed had he made him just another cop. Many of Leaphorn's traits, in fact, derive from his being Navajo. When he looks for George Bowlegs across desolate New Mexico territory, he tracks as only an Indian can. Some of his knowledge of Zuni ways comes as Leaphorn compares and contrasts this tribe's customs with his own tribal traditions. And it is Indian humor that gives the reader some insight into Leaphorn. Back at the Zuni police station, the Navajo listens to an FBI agent; when the agent leaves, the Indian policemen are unhappy about the lack of information given by the federal agents:

"It's like my daddy always told me," Pasquaanti said. "Never trust no goddam Induns. That right, Lieutenant?"

"That's right," Leaphorn said. "My grandmother had a motto hanging there in the hogan when I was a kid. Said 'Beware All Blanket-Asses.'"

Naranjo put on his hat, which, despite the season, was straw.

"Somebody should have warned Custer," he said.

Highsmith was out the door now. "That motto," he shouted back at Leaphorn. "How did she spell Blanket-Ass in Navajo?"

"Capital B," Leaphorn said. [p. 71]

More insight into the Leaphorn-Navajo mind comes in the commune where he interviews young hippies, one obviously on drugs:

"Is he on peyote?" Leaphorn asked. "If he is, they're usually all right after a couple of hours. But if it's not peyote, maybe a doctor should take a look at him."

"It couldn't be peyote," Halsey said, grinning again. "That stuff's illegal, isn't it?"

"It depends," Leaphorn said. "The way the Tribe sees it, it's O.K. if it's used for religious purposes. It's part of the ceremonial of the Native American Church and some of The People belong to that. The way it works, we don't notice people using peyote if they're using it in their religion. I'm guessing Otis here is a religious man." [p. 42]

To have the detective become friendly with the natives by being knowledgeable of their customs is nothing new in detective fiction; but Hillerman's Leaphorn speaks with the authority of one of the People.

More of the Leaphorn consciousness comes after he has learned of Cata's death. He sits alone looking over Zuni land:

Leaphorn studied the sky, his face dour. He was finding no order in his thoughts, none of that mild and abstract pleasure which the precise application of logic always brought to him. Instead there was only the discordant clash of improbable against unlikely, effect without cause, action without motive, patternless chaos. Leaphorn's orderly mind found this painful....Leaphorn came from the Taadii Dinee, the Slow-Talking People Clan....He had grown up among the sheepmen and hunters of Beautiful Mesa, families who descended from families who had elected to die when Kit Carson's horsemen came in 1864. Thus the handed-down tribal memories which surrounded Leaphorn's boyhood were not, like those of most Navajos of his generation, the grandfather tales of being herded into captivity, of the Long Walk away from the sacred

mountains to the concentration camp at Fort Stanton....Instead, the tales of Nashibitti were of the redder side of tragedy....He had been raised with his ears filled with his uncle's accounts of brutal cruelty and sublime bravery....[pp. 50-51]

Later, Leaphorn recalls the teachings of his people:

"When the dung beetle moves," Hosteen Nashibitti had told him, "know that something has moved it. And know that its movement affects the flight of the sparrow, and that the raven deflects the eagle from the sky, and that the eagle's stiff wing bends the will of the Wind People, and know that all of this affects you and me, and the flea on the prairie dog and the leaf on the cotton wood." That had always been the point of the lesson. Interdependency of nature. Every cause has its effect. Every action its reaction. A reason for everything. In all things a pattern, and in this pattern, the beauty of harmony. [p. 52]

Here and in other parts of the novel, Hillerman uses Leaphorn's Navajo teachings as motivation for the detective to solve the mystery of the death of Cata.

Father Ingles is one of several sources for Leaphorn's information about Zuni teachings. From the priest he learns of Kothluwalawa, a heaven on earth where Zuni kachinas reside; translated into English, Ingles explains, Kothluwalawa means Dance Hall of the Gods or Dance Ground of the Spirits, (p. 100) Ingles believes that if George Bowlegs looked for Kothluwalawa, he would go to a little lake west of Zuni across the Arizona border, and he relates one of the Zuni myths concerning the place:

"The Zunis had completed their emergence up through the four underworlds and had started their great journey hunting for the Middle Place of the Universe. Some children of the Wood Fraternity were carried across the Zuni River by the older people. There was sort of a panic and the children were dropped. As they were washed downstream, instead of drowning they turned into water animals — frogs, snakes, tadpoles, so forth — and they swam downstream to this place we're talking about. According to the mythology, it's a lake. Once they got there, the children changed from water animals and became kachinas, and they formed the Council of the Gods — the Rain God of the North, the Rain God of the South, the Little Fire God, and the rest of

them. Originally a hundred or so, I think."

"Sort of like the Holy People of the Navajo," Leaphorn said.

"Not really. Your Holy People — Monster Slayer, Changing Woman, Born of Water, and all that — they're more like a cross between the Greek hero idea and the lesser Greek gods. More human than divine, you know. The kachinas aren't like anything in Navajo or white culture. We don't have a word for this concept, and neither do you. They're not gods. The Zuni have only one God, Awonawilona, who was the creator. And then they have Shiwanni and Shinwanokia — a man-and-woman team created by God to create the Sun, and Mother Earth, and all living things. But the kachinas are different. Maybe you could call them ancestor spirits. Their attitude toward humans is friendly, fatherly. They bring blessings. They appear as rain clouds." [pp. 99-100]3

The plot of *Dance Hall of the Dead* weaves in and out of the Zuni celebration of their tribal myths, myths like the one recounted by Father Ingles. Ernesto Cata is killed while practicing for his part in the celebration as the Little Fire God. Leaphorn tracks Bowlegs to and from the lake where kachinas reside. Both boys fear they may have violated customs, and upset the kachinas, for having taken chips of flint from the anthropologist's excavation site. Eventually, after both boys are murdered, the reader learns that what they have violated is a white man's custom, one scientist's need for secrecy about the dig, a place he has "salted" with phony relics. The climax of the story comes at Zuni pueblo during the final hours of the celebration of Shalako. Bowlegs, who wants so much to be Zuni, cannot stay away from the celebration and is murdered by the anthropologist. At the end of the novel, Leaphorn's part is passive in the face of Zuni custom. The anthropologist violates Zuni law by wearing a kachina mask when he kills Cata and Bowlegs. Before Leaphorn can get to the murderer, unknown Zunis drag the man away to administer Zuni justice, and the anthropologist is never heard from again.

In an "author's note" at the beginning of *Dance Hall of the Dead*, Hillerman writes of plot and setting:

In this book, the setting is genuine. The Village of Zuni and the landscape of the Zuni reservation and the adjoining Ramah Navajo reservation are accurately depicted to the best of my ability. The characters are purely fictional. The view the reader receives of the Shalako religion is as it might be seen by a Navajo with an interest in

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ethnology. It does not pretend to be more than that.

From the above discussion of the kachina role in the novel, it is obvious that Zuni lore plays an important role in determining plot, even though Hillerman claims not to be writing a treatise on Zuni traditions. But setting, as well as plot, determines much of the reader's attitudes toward the characters. Hillerman says, "...the setting is genuine." He appears to have spent much time in the area which is only miles from his home in Albuquerque.

With his description of Zuni village Hillerman sets the climatic mood for the story as the Indians move like extensions of the town. The afternoon before

Bowlegs is killed, Leaphorn looks down at the village from a ridge:

Lieutenant Joseph Leaphorn spent the afternoon on the ridge that overlooks the village of Zuni from the south....[He] felt the faintest trace of breeze on his cheek. Cold. It had been dead calm. The orgy of baking which caught up the women of Zuni each Shalako season had reached its climax during the morning. Now most of the outdoor ovens were cooling. But a thin layer of blue smoke still hung in the air over the pueblo. It made a faint smear as far northwest as the Zuni Buttes and eastward to the gaudy water tower at Black Rock....Already the wide

shoulders of state road 53 were cluttered with cars and campers and pickups. The Zuni people had come home from wherever they had wandered — college campuses, jobs in California and Washington. Those who called themselves the Flesh of the Flesh were drawn back to their birthplace for this great Coming Home of their ancestor spirits. [p. 146-147]

Later, the detective ponders the number of people before him: "Leaphorn sighed. Normally Zuni Village held perhaps 3,500 of the 4,500 Zunis. Tonight seven or eight thousand people would be crowded here." (p. 148) Zuni pueblo and the accompanying mass of Indians Leaphorn joins provides Hillerman with the dangerous and secretive atmosphere of the big city, that atmosphere the detective story demands. But Leaphorn finds himself in dangerous spots in other parts of the Zuni territory.

In one of Hillerman's finest passages, Leaphorn tracks Bowlegs in the desert and is shot with a hypodermic dart used for stunning animals. The Navajo experiences psychedelic visions after the shooting:

His hand fell from his leg and crashed into the ground. Leaphorn willed for a moment that it would rise again and restore itself to its perch away from the stony ground. But the hand simply lay there and Leaphorn retreated from it, and lost himself, falling, falling, falling into a glittering psychedelic dream in which the cold moon again pulsed in an inky void and a hunter sat naked on a ridge, working with infinite patience, chipping out lance points from pink ice, breaking them, dropping the broken parts onto the earth beside him, taking defeat after defeat without a show of anger. [p. 135]

He remembers the chant of an Indian brother:

(Continued on Page 52)



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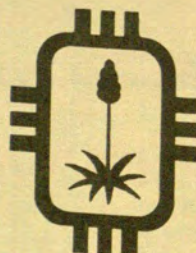
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(Continued from Page 6)

"Deer, Deer,
I come following your hoofprints.
Sacred favors I bring as I run.
Yes, yes, yes."

His psychedelic experience comes and goes: "Then the nightmare was on him again, worse than before. The sky filled with the chindi of the dead. They wore deerskin masks and their great beaks clacked." (p. 139) As Leaphorn comes out of the dream world the drug induced, the reader feels the hallucinations could have come only in the desert. His visions are in terms of the desert land around him.

Another desert site, one Leaphorn visits several times, is occupied by scientists apparently digging for vestiges of ancient inhabitants of the area. The diggers reflect the barrenness of the land they explore. Ted Isaacs, a young graduate student trying to do a good enough job to land employment after his

degree, pushes aside the love of Suzanne, a young girl from the commune. Reynolds, a well-known scientist, turns out to be so intent on his work that he does not stop at falsifying his findings but goes on to murder to preserve his reputation. Ironically, neither Reynolds nor Isaacs sift through the desert sands for science; rather, they search for and discover their own emptiness, an emptiness the white man sees as desert.

Thematically, Leaphorn also searches. As he looks for George Bowlegs, a fellow Navajo, he stalks himself and his Indian heritage. And Hillerman has written a special book for this reason. *Dance Hall of the Dead* offers the trappings of a good detective story, Joe Leaphorn operating in the best tradition of the hard-boiled cop; but the novel includes such variation on the detective theme, including some manipulation of point of view. The book also says much about the lore of the Indian, centering of the Zuni kachinas. In addition, Hillerman makes effective use of setting, letting the action and personalities of the characters grow from the land. Finally, it is the character of Leaphorn that stands out in the narrative. Hillerman has a feel for the Navajo cop that he translates to the reader. Leaphorn is beyond the stereotyped detective. He is human. He is Navajo.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Hillerman's comments were made at New Mexico Junior College, Hobbs, April 29, 1976.

² Tony Hillerman, *Dance Hall of the Dead* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 1. All future quotes will be from this book.

³ Ruth L. Bunzel's *Zuni Kachinas*, originally published in 1932 and reprinted in 1973, details many of the Zuni myths. The book contains beautiful drawings and sketches of the individual kachinas. □

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