

America West

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JULY 1987

Guiding Light

Indian lore inspires
a New Mexico novelist
to master the mystery



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A I R L I N E S M A G A Z I N E

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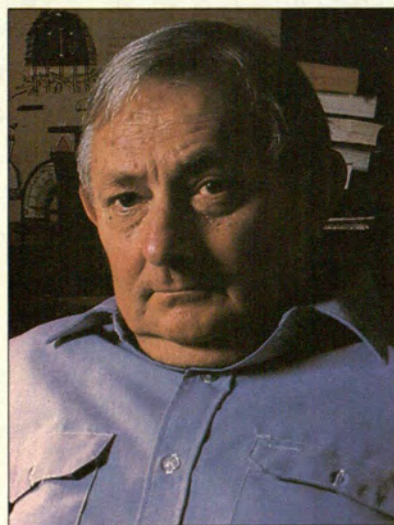
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Novel Writer

*Tony Hillerman unites
sleuthing and Indian lore*

BY VIKKI STEA

It's a perfect setting for a mystery: a landscape where craggy spires of eroded rock tower above the desert floor, where desolate dry washes and deep canyons hide their secrets, where shape-changing witches prowl at night and gray restless ghosts are only a whisper away.

It's a perfect setting, but only Albuquerque-based mystery writer Tony Hillerman uses it. Hillerman, "the world's only ethnological mystery writer," deftly weaves his tales of murder and intrigue on the sprawling Navajo Reservation of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. Whereas the beat of most fictional detectives is the hard concrete of a big city, Hillerman's crime solvers, Navajo Tribal Police detectives Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn, must hunt down clues over 25,000 square miles—a landscape bigger than all of New England.

You might think murder would be enough of a problem. But read any Hillerman novel and you're likely to find a few added twists. There may be rumors of corpse sickness or of evil strangers who turn themselves into wolves. Army missiles can come crashing down and never be found again. A suspect may look like a Zuni Indian Mole Kachina, an ancestor spirit who inhabits a mask, "painted the color of darkness," with a fierce beak and "round yellow-circled eyes." ▸

Vikki Stea lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

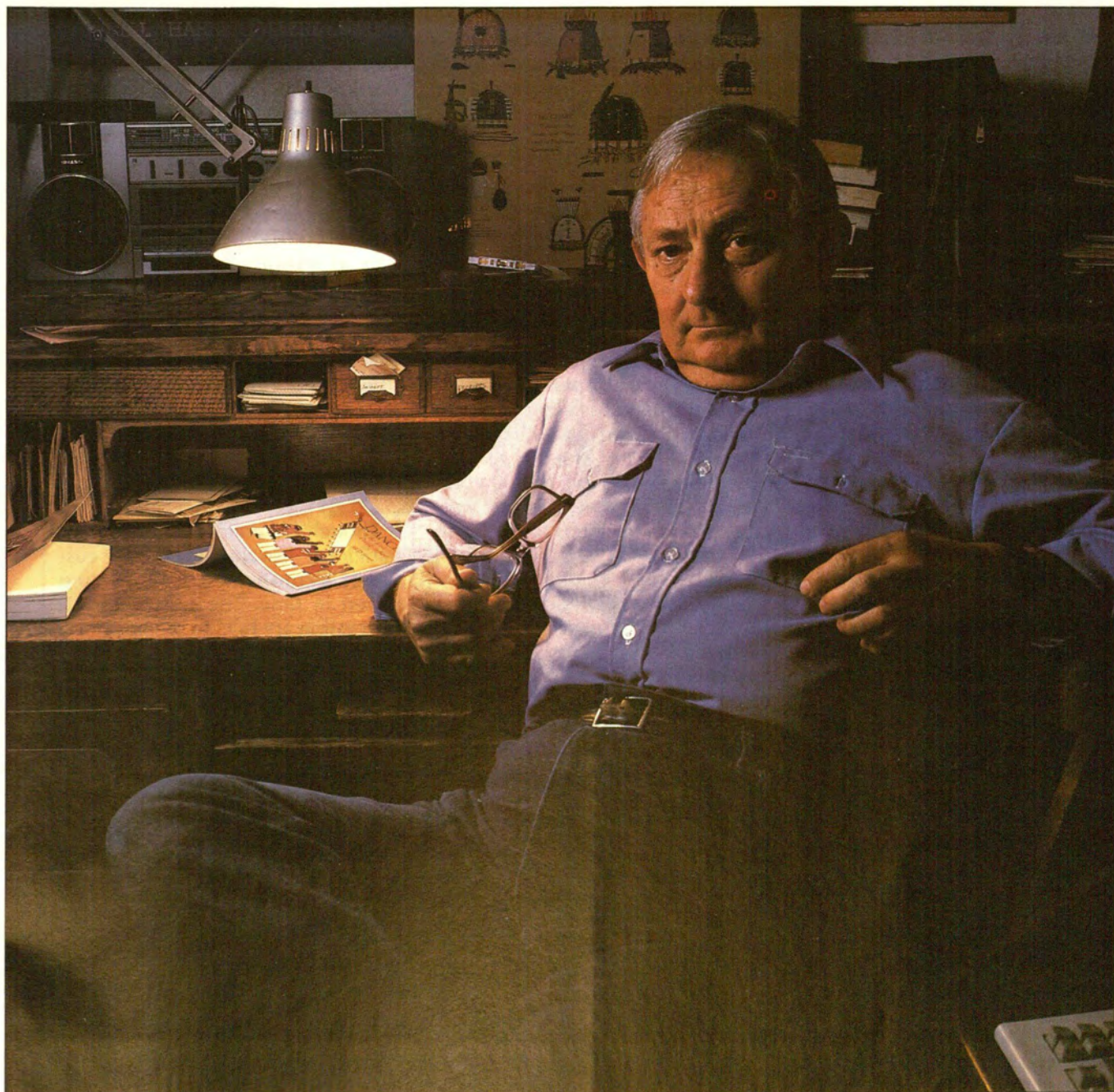


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'I'd like a reader to finish my book and think to himself, "Hey, this is not a primitive people. This is a rich, complicated metaphysical system and I want to learn more about it." '

— Tony Hillerman

"I've always been fascinated by Indian cultures," says 61-year-old Hillerman, "and I figured other people would be, too."

And so they are, if sales of his books are any indication. Hillerman has had five of his seven ethnological mysteries on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and five have been book club selections. In 1973 his *Dance Hall of the Dead* won the prestigious Edgar Allen Poe award for the best mystery of the year. His books have been translated into 10 languages. And with each new book—his latest, *Skinwalkers*, came out this year—reviews have been better and more numerous.

Not only are his mysteries eagerly read around the world, but they also are perennial best-sellers on the Navajo Reservation, where they're used as teaching materials in high schools and community colleges.

Hard-core mystery fans represent a fraction of his readers. The books are just as likely to be selected by someone who has never picked up a mystery before. "I've always thought I had two kinds of unusual readers," Hillerman says in the southern accent he retains from his Oklahoma childhood, "refugees from the Southwest who've moved away and read my books out of nostalgia, and people who have always wanted to visit this part of the country."

Hillerman, a friendly, soft-spoken man, recently retired from his job teaching journalism at the University of New Mexico so he could devote more time to writing. Since the publication of his first book in 1970, sales of his mysteries and demands on his time have both escalated. As Hillerman leans back in his chair and surveys the small cluttered office in his suburban Albuquerque home, where he does most of his work, he mentions casually that he has just returned from giving the keynote address at a conference—an anthropology conference. "I don't know why they keep inviting me," he says modestly. "I suppose it's because I write about Navajos."

For 17 years Tony Hillerman has written not only about Navajos, but also about Zunis and Hopis with such consummate skill that he has become something more than a fiction writer. To many of his readers, anthropol-

ogists included, he has become a literary window providing an inside look at Southwestern Indian land and culture:

The thunderhead that promised a shower to Tuba Mesa in the morning had drifted eastward over the Painted Desert and evaporated—the promise unfulfilled. Now another, taller thunderhead had climbed the sky to the north—over the slopes of Navajo Mountain in Utah. The color under it was blue-black, suggesting that on one small quadrant of mountainside the blessed rain was falling. Far to the southeast, blue and dim with distance, another towering cloud had risen over the Chuskas on the Arizona-New Mexico border. There were other promising clouds to the south, drifting over the Hopi Reservation. The Hopis had held a rain dance Sunday, calling on the clouds—their ancestors—to restore the water blessing to the land. Perhaps the kachinas had listened to their Hopi children. Perhaps not. It was not a Navajo concept, this idea of adjusting nature to human needs. The Navajo adjusted himself to remain in harmony with the universe. When nature withheld the rain, the Navajo sought the pattern of this phenomenon—as he sought the pattern of all things—to find its beauty and live in harmony with it.

—From *Listening Woman*

As we jolt along the difficult reservation roads with Chee and Leaphorn, we also learn about ceremonies like the Enemy Way, a complicated and rarely used three-day ritual involving sand-paintings and special songs. The purpose behind the ritual is to gain power over a non-Navajo "enemy" (human or witch). We watch as an arrow is shot into a symbolic enemy "scalp" (something the person has worn or touched, in this case a hat) and then see the scalp sprinkled with ashes, signifying its symbolic "death."

We learn that when someone dies inside a hogan, the owners of the dwelling must board up its door, plug its smoke pipe, break a hole in the north wall and take the body out through the hole. The family then must build a new hogan because the

old one, Navajos believe, will be forever haunted by the ghost of the dead person. (To Navajos, all ghosts are malicious.)

And we learn that it is good for men to avoid their mothers-in-law:

The smoke was coming from stove pipes in both houses, making wisps of blue as separate as the suppers the occupants were cooking. Chee's uncle and his uncle's mother-in-law were following the instructions of Changing Woman, who had taught that when men look upon the mothers of the women they marry it may cause blindness and other more serious problems. To Jim Chee it seemed perfectly natural.

Though his policemen encounter traditional Navajo beliefs and customs, Hillerman never draws a picture frozen in time. The people on his reservation are full of contradictions. Old ways blend and clash with new ones borrowed from non-Indian culture. This is a world where the same people who bring their laundry to a modern Economy Wash-O-Mat will cleanse the body and spirit in a traditional sauna-like sweat-lodge. It's a world where officer Jim Chee eats canned peaches and bologna sandwiches just as any non-Indian policeman might, but is at the same time concerned that he may have been contaminated by ghost sickness after entering a hogan where a man has died.

Both Chee and Leaphorn have been trained in conventional police techniques, but they bring something special to their work—an understanding and respect for their people's beliefs.

It's a respect Tony Hillerman shares. "It's always troubled me that American people are so ignorant of these rich Indian cultures," he says. "I think it's important to show how aspects of ancient Indian ways are very much alive."

Although he didn't start out to educate people—he just wanted to write a good mystery—Hillerman always assumes he's writing for those who know nothing about either the Southwest or Indians. "I'd like that reader to finish my book," he says, "and think to himself, 'Hey, this is not a primitive people, this is a rich,

complicated metaphysical system and I want to learn more about it.”

Hillerman's earlier years never suggested he would one day become a fictional interpreter of Southwest Indian life and lore. The farm boy from Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma, grew up playing with Indian children, but spent the first 17 years of his career as a journalist. He admits getting off to a running start as the creator of Purina Pig Chow commercials in Oklahoma City, a job that lasted four weeks.

After that, career opportunities improved. As a police reporter for the *News Herald* of Borger, Texas, Hillerman began the process of mentally filing away crimes and characters he would use years later in his fiction. He also gained confidence in his ability to understand the attitudes of the average policeman, attitudes his characters Chee and Leaphorn would adopt.

In 1952 Hillerman's job with United Press International transferred him to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and by 1962 he

had worked his way up through the ranks to become executive editor of Santa Fe's daily, *The New Mexican*. He was 38 years old and was supporting a wife and six kids. He had security and a respected place in the community. But Hillerman still had something to prove to himself. With the encouragement of his wife, Marie, he decided to quit and start a new career. "I wanted to write book-length fiction," he says. "I gave my six months notice and began to figure out how to do it."

By 1963 Hillerman had moved to Albuquerque, enrolled as a graduate student of English at the University of New Mexico and was working part time as assistant to the president of the university. Despite his goal of writing a novel, he didn't begin his first book, *The Blessingway*, until 1967. He had plans to write "the great American novel," but decided to write a mystery first in order to polish his skills. "I liked what certain people had been able to do with the mystery form," he says, "people like Raymond Chandler and Graham Green, who created novels of character and per-

sonality out of them." He picked the Navajo Reservation as his setting because it was exotic.

After months of detailed research in libraries and on the reservation, Hillerman finally completed *The Blessingway* and sent it on to his agent. Unfortunately, she wasn't interested in helping him publish it. "She thought I could make much better money with non-fiction," he says. "She was right, of course, but I was determined to write fiction, so I got the manuscript back and sent it to Harper & Row, where it was accepted."

The Blessingway—the story of a reservation murder involving a Navajo witch—sold twice as well as the average first novel and was optioned for a film. At first the author was nervous about the reception his book would get from the Navajos. "I wanted badly not to be wrong about anything and I worried about it," he says. But Hillerman had been careful, as he has been with each subsequent book, to check and recheck his facts. He always discusses the cultural aspects of his stories with several Nav-

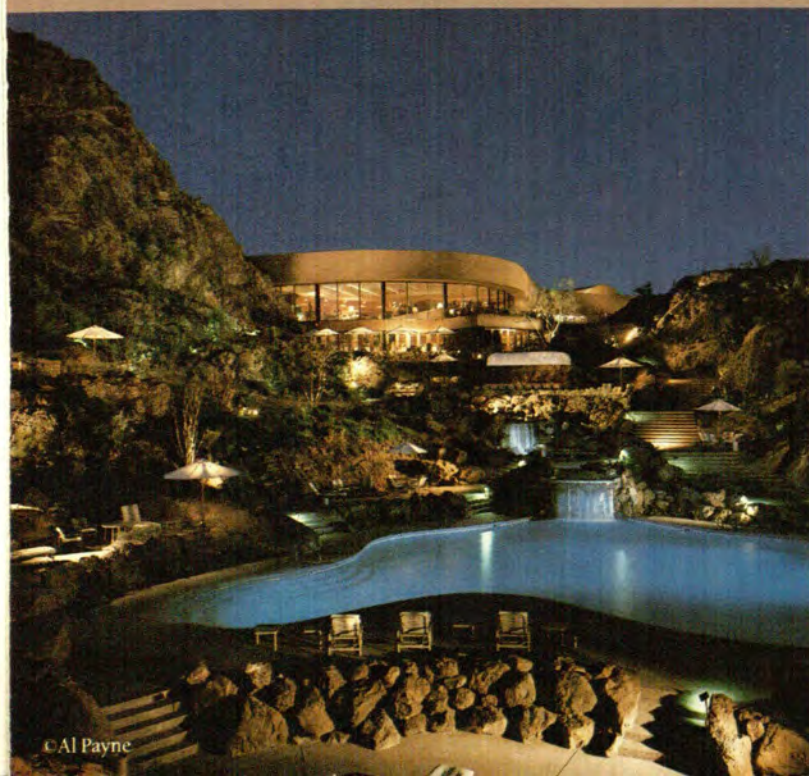
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ajo. "There are around 200,000 Navajo, and they're broken up into about 60 clans," he explains. "There's lots of variation from one part of the reservation to another. It's hard to take information from research books alone and be accurate."

After the publication of his second ethnological mystery, *Dance Hall of the Dead*, set partly on the Zuni Reservation, Hillerman received favorable comments from both Navajos and Zunis. Indians began using the books in their schools, and in 1973 he was given what he considers one of his highest honors: He was asked by seniors at Zuni High School to be their commencement speaker.

Today, Hillerman occasionally lectures about his writing at the Navajo Community College, or gives informal talks to younger children on the reservation. He asks members of his young audiences to send along any anecdotes or stories they think he could use in his novels. The response is always positive, and it pleases him that his books are popular with Navajo children and have sometimes had an effect on their self-image.

Says Hillerman, "I've had people call me and tell me something like this: 'My kids weren't interested in the old way, in the Navajo Way. But then in school, they ran into your books and that got my children interested in their own cultural roots.' One librarian told me that this is true partly because what I write is relevant to the children. They see an outsider treating their culture with obvious respect, which they don't always get if they go to Gallup or Farmington. And seeing it treated with respect in a nationally published book, one that's read around the world, has a positive impact on them."

Alan Black, an English instructor at Navajo Community College in Shiprock, uses Hillerman's books in his beginning English classes. "This is sometimes the first time students have read anything with a Navajo theme and location," he says. "We get more response from these books than any other kind we use. Many of our students have lived off the reservation, and they may not know Navajo culture very well. Often it's a revelation for them."

Aldean Pullen, the librarian at Shiprock High School, agrees, adding that the library can't keep Hillerman's books in stock. "They're read and reread," she says. "I finally had to buy some in hardback."

In an essay Hillerman wrote for the book *Colloquim On Crime*, he mentions that another librarian once gave him the best review he's ever received:

I was discussing the work of Indian novelists Leslie Silko (Ceremony), James Welch (Winter in the Blood), and Scott Momaday (House Made of Dawn). "They are artists," I said. "I am a storyteller."

"Yes," the librarian said. "We read them and their books are beautiful. We say, 'Yes, this is us. This is reality.' But it leaves us sad with no hope. We read of Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn and old man Tso and Margaret Cigaret and the Tsosies and Begays and again we say, 'Yes, this is us. But now we win.' Like the stories our grandmothers used to tell us, they make us feel good about being Navajos." □

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