

A man and his land

Tony Hillerman's true tales of New Mexico

There may be no better love story between a man and the land than the one Tony Hillerman shared with the Southwest. Born in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, the legendary mystery-novel author fought in World War II and then moved to Santa Fe in the 1950s. He worked as a reporter and editor at *The Santa Fe New Mexican* before taking a teaching position at the University of New Mexico and moving to Albuquerque. His mysteries set in the Navajo Nation are beloved for the level of cultural insight and passion he possessed for his subject matter, which Hillerman also expressed in nonfiction essays about life in New Mexico that he published in magazines and then in a collection, *The Great Taos Bank Robbery and Other True Stories* (Harper & Row, 1973). The book was reissued by HarperCollins in 2001, and now, four years after Hillerman's death, the University of New Mexico Press has published a third edition with a new foreword by his daughter, Anne Hillerman, and photographs by Don Strel. Hillerman and Strel present a slide show and discuss the book at Collected Works Bookstore on Friday, May 25.

"Just as religious converts tend to be more passionate about their faith, Dad claimed New Mexico as home with missionary fervor even though his voice never lost its Oklahoma accent," Anne Hillerman writes. "The state's varied

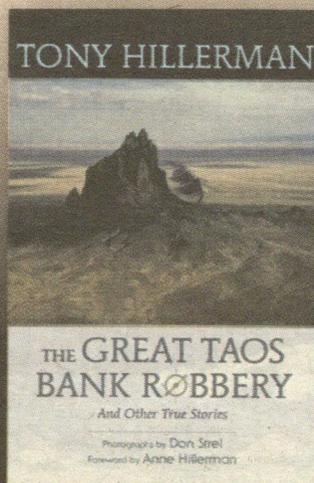
and expansive vistas stirred his imagination. Its people spoke to his heart and tickled his sense of humor." In 17 true stories he tells about New Mexico, Hillerman has thoroughly investigated his topics and in many cases synthesizes a wealth of knowledge into the narratives, which are often about people who deserve more recognition than they have previously received.

The title story is the endearing tale of two intellectually challenged would-be thieves and the criminal justice system in 1957 Taos, with a quick side trip to the Great Flood of 1935. (A state of emergency was declared when residents' adobe roofs began caving in after several days of persistent drizzle.) It is a charming story told in a voice that can barely contain its laughter.

Hillerman is present in his true stories, accompanying the reader as she first learns of Cletus Cyprian Xywanda, a guest observer-reporter at *The New Mexican* from Nigeria, who provoked arguments about the city's pros and cons late into the night at Frank's Lounge. Tossed casually into the prose, Hillerman's references to people and places add a layer of historical information that isn't recorded anywhere else. The rhythms of speech and sometimes mundane encounters he writes about reveal a New Mexico, and a United States of America, of a bygone era, though many of the essays also highlight how little certain social issues have changed over time.

Possibly the book's most important story for New Mexicans, and certainly the most relevant for newcomers hoping to understand their adopted home, is Chapter 15, "Quijote in Rio Arriba County," about Reies Lopez Tijerina, his group Alianza (founded in 1963 to restore Spanish land grants to descendants of original owners), and the violent rally the group held at the courthouse in the village of Coyote. Hillerman covers the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the history of the land dispute, economic implications for Hispanic New Mexicans in small mountain villages through the generations, and the cultural and psychological motivations of Tijerina, who became a "darling of the radical left," eventually spent time in prison, and remains a divisive figure among New Mexicans. Thousands laud him as a tireless advocate for social justice, while an equal number believe he is dangerous. Hillerman imbues Tijerina with both qualities; never once reducing him to a stereotype of a villain or a hero.

One of the book's more complex and illuminating stories is about the discovery of prehistoric life in the American Southwest. In Chapter 9, "The Hunt for the Lost American," Hillerman accompanies an anthropologist on a dig and tells the reader about Folsom Man in New Mexico. This piece is largely about the slow process of digging for evidence of past civilizations. He returns to the topic in Chapter 13, "Othello in Union County," where the reader meets George McJunkin, a man born into slavery and freed as a teenager during the Civil War. He moved to what is now Folsom, New Mexico, and after a flood found the bison bones that eventually led to other discoveries that established



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the existence of Folsom Man. "Othello in Union County" is about far more than this finding; it's about how McJunkin lived as a black man among cowboys and ranchers in the first years after slavery and about how the implications of his discovery were ignored or explained away by established experts. The stories in the book haven't been updated to reflect advances in human knowledge or sensitivity to language, evidenced by Hillerman's repeated reference to McJunkin using a racial epithet. It might have been McJunkin's nickname when he was alive or a reference to a similarly nicknamed character in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or it may have been a direct attempt by Hillerman, much like Twain's aim in his novel, to highlight McJunkin's isolation and identity as The Other. Regardless of the reason, the nickname marks an era in history when such a reference didn't raise hackles or call into question any racial bias on Hillerman's part.

Many of the stories feel fresh because Hillerman doesn't dance around his subject matter or filter his observations through our modern lens of well-intentioned political correctness. His filter seems to have been his own innate sensitivity to human nature. In "The Apache Who Wouldn't Be Missed," a storekeeper refuses to loan a Jicarilla Indian a dollar because the man is an alcoholic and the storekeeper doesn't want him to get drunk. "Do you remember where you were the last time I saw you? You were passed out in the ditch there west of Dulce and I took you to the hospital and that doctor there told you what this drinking was doing to you. If you get drunk like that again it's going to kill you," the storekeeper says. After a moment of silence the Indian says, "Would you miss me?" The storekeeper laughs and hands over the dollar.

Hillerman witnessed this exchange while applying for a fishing permit. His ability to render the pacing of conversation with such emotional and tonal clarity — the storekeeper's genuine concern, the Indian's deadpan sense of humor — makes each piece in *The Great Taos Bank Robbery* feel like a road trip through the state and through time with a revered but jocular professor who prefers anecdotes to lectures, as though you are not reading the stories but listening to them. ◀

details

- ▼ Anne Hillerman & Don Strel discuss Tony Hillerman's book *The Great Taos Bank Robbery and Other True Stories*
- ▼ 6 p.m. Friday, May 25
- ▼ Collected Works Bookstore, 202 Galisteo St., 988-4226



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