

Around 505

Fall Foliage | Mexican Rodeo

New Mexico's Metropolitan Magazine
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**Most Notable
Wines of NM**

**The Flourishing
Fashion Of
Virgil Ortiz**

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On the cover:

Cochiti Pueblo native Virgil Ortiz' latest fashions include hand-embroidered leather jackets and jeans and exotic handbags. Hat by O'Farrell of Santa Fe. A penetrating portrait of the artist on page 40; and his latest Indigene and Renegade line on page 42. Cover photo by Anthony "Thosh" Collins.

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I'd like to care, but you see, I'm mandicapped.

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New Mexico's Mysterious Attraction

Throughout the United States, mysteries draw more readers than almost any other type of fiction except romance. Despite our reputation for quirkiness, New Mexico follows the trend. Bookstores here do a thriving business in who-done-its, and buyers love books set in New Mexico by New Mexico authors.

In the University of New Mexico Press catalog, in addition to academic books, you'll find 31 mysteries – titles by Pari Noskin Taichert, Judith Van Gieson, Walter Satterthwait, Jake Page, Richard E. Peck and Richard Benke. UNM even publishes mysteries by Rudolfo Anaya, best known for the literary novel *Bless Me Ultima*. The state has honored its best-known mystery writers, Tony Hillerman and Michael McGarrity, with the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts.

Southwest Writers, one of the region's oldest associations for authors, has a special category for mysteries in its annual contest. Wordharvest Writers Workshops feature classes to help mystery writers hone their craft. The University of New Mexico includes mysteries in its Taos Summer Writers Conference. New Mexico is also home to the Tony Hillerman Writers Conference: Focus on Mystery and a national mystery short story contest.

Why all the interest?

Start with the landscape, author Van Gieson said. The average person beholds a gorgeous New Mexico vista and thinks "wow." A mystery writer looks at the buttes, mesas, mountains and arroyos and begins to plan how to hide a body or confuse a sleuth in hot pursuit. Open ended and expansive, the landscape allows the imagination to play.

"Because it's not as well known as some places in the country, New Mexico makes readers curious," she said. "People are interested in the



Tony Hillerman

location. Mysteries are a great way to have fun and learn something at the same time."

An Albuquerque writer with two series and 13 published books to her credit, Van Gieson didn't set out to write about New Mexico. "I thought I would be lucky just to finish *North of the Border* (her first book). I never expected to spend 20 years writing about this state."

"Tony (Hillerman) paved the way for the rest of us," Van Gieson said. "All of us owe him our gratitude."

Hillerman, who lives in Albuquerque, published his first novel, *The Blessingway*, in 1970. It was the first mystery to take readers to New Mexico's exotic high desert landscape and the Navajo reservation. The 18 mysteries which followed put this state on the literary map. Many became national best sellers and several were made into movies filmed here.

Hillerman said one of New Mexico's biggest attractions for him is its Navajo, Zuni and Pueblo heritage. His novels, which have sold millions of

copies in more than a dozen languages all over the world, teach readers about Native culture because these beliefs are germane to the plot.

"Before *Blessingway*, I started a couple of other novels, wrote a chapter or two, put them on the shelf," Hillerman said. "But it was different with *Blessingway* because as I was writing I had a chance to describe this beautiful and unique landscape and interesting people."

New Mexico inspires writers because its history is full of mysteries. For example, he said, there's the legendary story of a settler returning to Mexico with an abundance of gold. "He's about to be waylaid by Apaches so he hides the gold in a mountain cave on what is now the government's White Sands Proving Ground. People are still sneaking in, trying to find it."

Santa Fe writer McGarrity, the author of the popular Kevin Kearney series, believes that New Mexico is "absolutely" a fine place for

writers, and they have mined the state's deep veins of landscape, culture and history for hundreds of years.

"Look at the rich trove of myths and legends, the stories of real people and events from the past, all intermixed in this great, multicultural stew. When we talk about cultures, in addition to the ones you think of first, there are Europeans, the Lebanese and other people from the Middle East, escapees from the East Coast, immigrants from Central America and Mexico. Great, interesting characters."

"New Mexico is a young state, less than 100 years old. We have a history of the Wild West. People here tend to settle the score themselves, privately. It's a third-world quality that comes from rugged individualism and freewheeling violence."

If you don't think New Mexicans by nature are contentious, McGarrity said, just look at letters to the editor in any newspaper.

On top of all that comes the state's startling, stark, majestic landscape, "a setting with rich textures, land you can paint the page with — high desert, rugged peaks, remote areas. Put that in the stew, too."

Eva Borins, co-owner of Santa Fe's Garcia Street Books, noted that New Mexico mysteries are popular among tourists and residents.

"Visitors look for them and regular customers ask when is the next Hillerman coming out. Or they know McGarrity usually does a book a year. If it's not here on the dot, they get crazy."

Borins also attributed some of New Mexico's attraction to its cultural diversity. "Our woo-woo element, the spiritual travelers, makes it interesting," she said.

Nationally known mystery writers Jonathan and Faye Kellerman purchased a home in Santa Fe and set a story there. Former New Mexico resident Stuart Woods used Santa Fe as the setting for *Santa Fe Rules* and his new novel, *Short Straw*, due out in October. Pari Noskin Taichert's books take the readers to places most might not visit on their own, destinations such as Clovis and Belen.

Among New Mexico's rising stars, Borins said, is Virginia Swift of Albuquerque, author of *Hello Stranger* and other Mustang Sally mysteries.

Swift, who teaches at the University of New Mexico, set her series in Wyoming and is drafting a new comic mystery series set in New Mexico. "It'll feature a crazy family, a mix up of Hispanics, Jews, Yankees, all related," she said.

"I think the West in general is a great place to write and set mysteries. Weird stuff keeps on happening. And working at the University, you're always figuring out who you'll kill on paper."

Swift said she enjoys the camaraderie among New Mexico writers. "Everyone has been wonderful to me, and I'm happy to help out when I can. Michael McGarrity was a mentor when I was first starting. And all of us have benefited from Tony Hillerman creating a great community for us."

Luther Wilson, publisher at UNM Press, noted that most college presses don't publish much fiction and none he knows of have as many mysteries. "New Mexico has a long-standing tradition of fine fiction. Every other person I run into is writing a novel New Mexico has some advantages over other states for writers. We have fascinating typography if you like to write descriptions of landscape and weather And we seem to have more murders per capita, people shooting each other with wild abandon, and also some weirdo murders. Mystery writers love that."

Mystery authors are abundant at New Mexico Book Co-Op.



Michael McGarrity

Best-selling books at the Co-Op's store in Albuquerque's Cottonwood Mall in 2005 included several mysteries: Don Bullis' *Bloodville*, Judith Van Gieson's *Land of Burning Heat* and a compilation of stories, *Mysteries and Miracles of New Mexico* by Jeff Radford. Mysteries outsold cookbooks, the No. 1 seller the year before.

Co-Op founder Paul Rhetts speculated that so many mystery writers call New Mexico home because it is an inspiring place to live.

"There are lots of little stories around us that turn on the switch. We have a long storytelling tradition in the Native American, Hispanic and cowboy culture. New Mexico's attraction has to do with the way stories are intertwined with culture. And mystery provides the hook that keeps us enthralled in so many stories."

Dorothy Massey, owner of Santa Fe's Collected Works bookstore, offers a special section on New Mexico mysteries on the store's website featuring Hillerman, McGarrity and Van Gieson. She also recommends Jake Page and Walter Satterthwait to

readers looking for New Mexico settings. Mysteries by James D. Doss and thrillers by Sarah Lovett and David Morrell also are popular.

"I also like Pamela Christie, a new writer. She's articulate and wonderful. She sells tremendously well," said Massey. Christie's *The King's Lizard, a Tale of Murder and Deception in Old Santa Fe* is set in 18th century Santa Fe.

Christie said, "In terms of a place to become famous, New Mexico is not really it. But in terms of a place to write a mystery, yeah, New Mexico is great. It's amazing how many people put things together on their own here and get them out in the world that way. New Mexico has pockets of creative, capable people making exciting things happen."

"You bump into unexpected things all the time here. Just recently I was helping a friend and found bones in a dank basement. The chapel of San Miguel (Santa Fe's oldest church) had a lot of people killed in it. I walk by and get goose bumps. If you can't write a story about that, you better not be in the business." ■

— After 20 years as a journalist, Anne Hillerman founded WORD-HARVEST (with former bookstore owner Jean Schaumberg) to offer writing classes using New Mexico authors as teachers. She is the author of *Children's Guide to Santa Fe* (Sunstone Press), and three other books and lives in Santa Fe.

This year's Tony Hillerman Conference: Focus on Mystery is Nov. 2-5 at Albuquerque's Hyatt Regency with Hillerman and Michael McGarrity. The conference offers practical information from published authors, book signings, panel discussions, prizes and writing contests.

Hillerman will open the conference with a discussion with Wes Studi, the actor who played Joe Leaphorn in several PBS movies based on Hillerman books. Other participating NM writers include Susan Slater, Virginia Swift, Sean Murphy and Jann Arrington Wolcott, and J.A. Jance as guest of honor with a keynote presentation. The author of two popular mysteries series, Jance will offer breakout sessions on plotting and how to write a successful series.

Other highlights include a visit to the Office of the New Mexico Medical Investigator; a \$1,500 prize and publication in our short story context; presentations on the *Language of Liars*, Hillerman's *Indian Country*, *How Not to Talk to a Publisher*, the business of writing, and public speaking for authors.