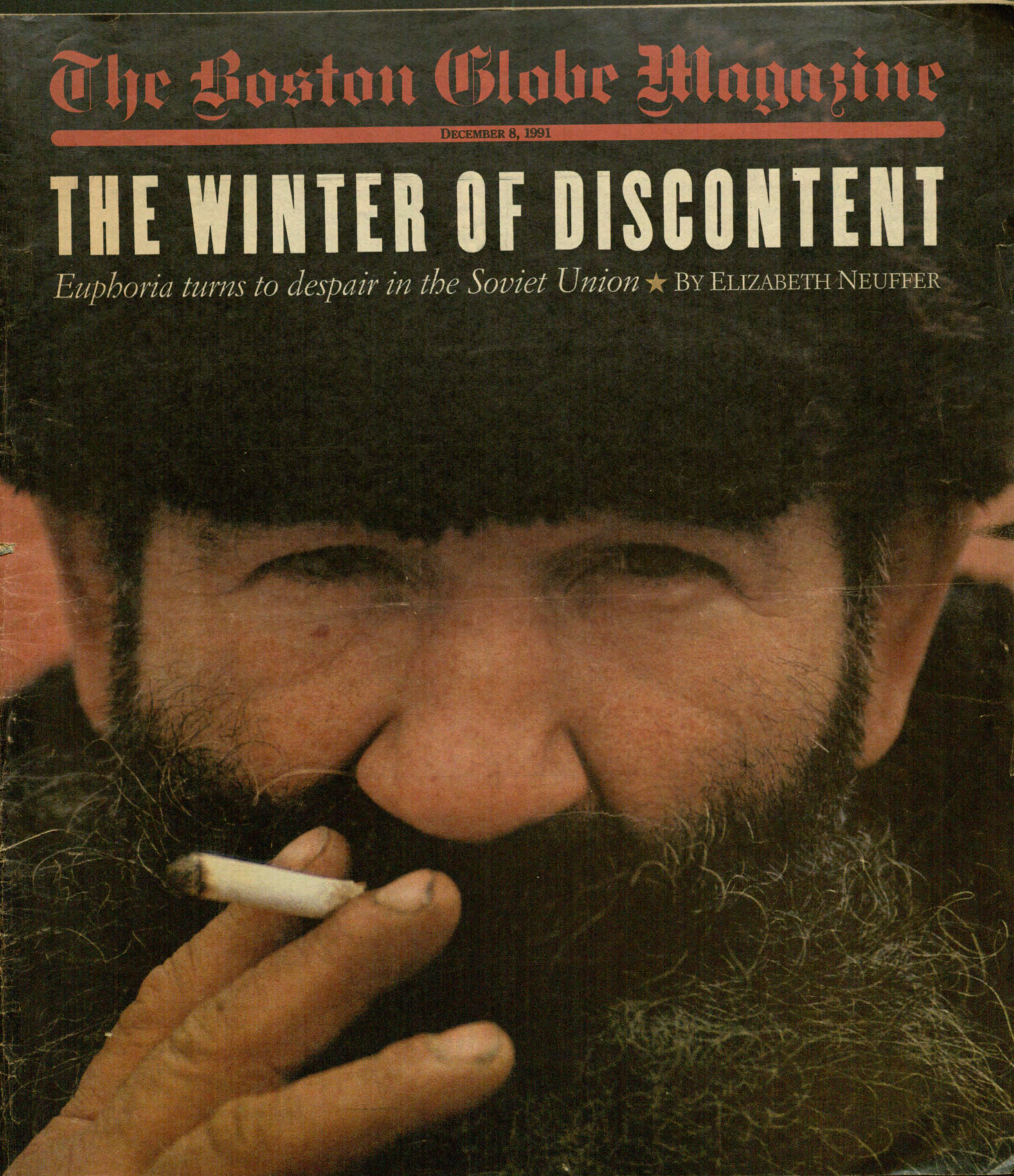

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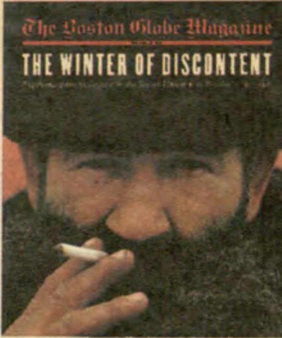

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The Boston Globe Magazine

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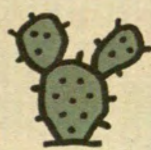
West Seller

Long before *Dances with Wolves*, mystery writer Tony Hillerman was heralded for his sensitive treatment of American Indian culture. The best-selling author's reputation will no doubt grow with the release early next year of the first movie based on one of his novels.



BY NORMAN BOUCHER

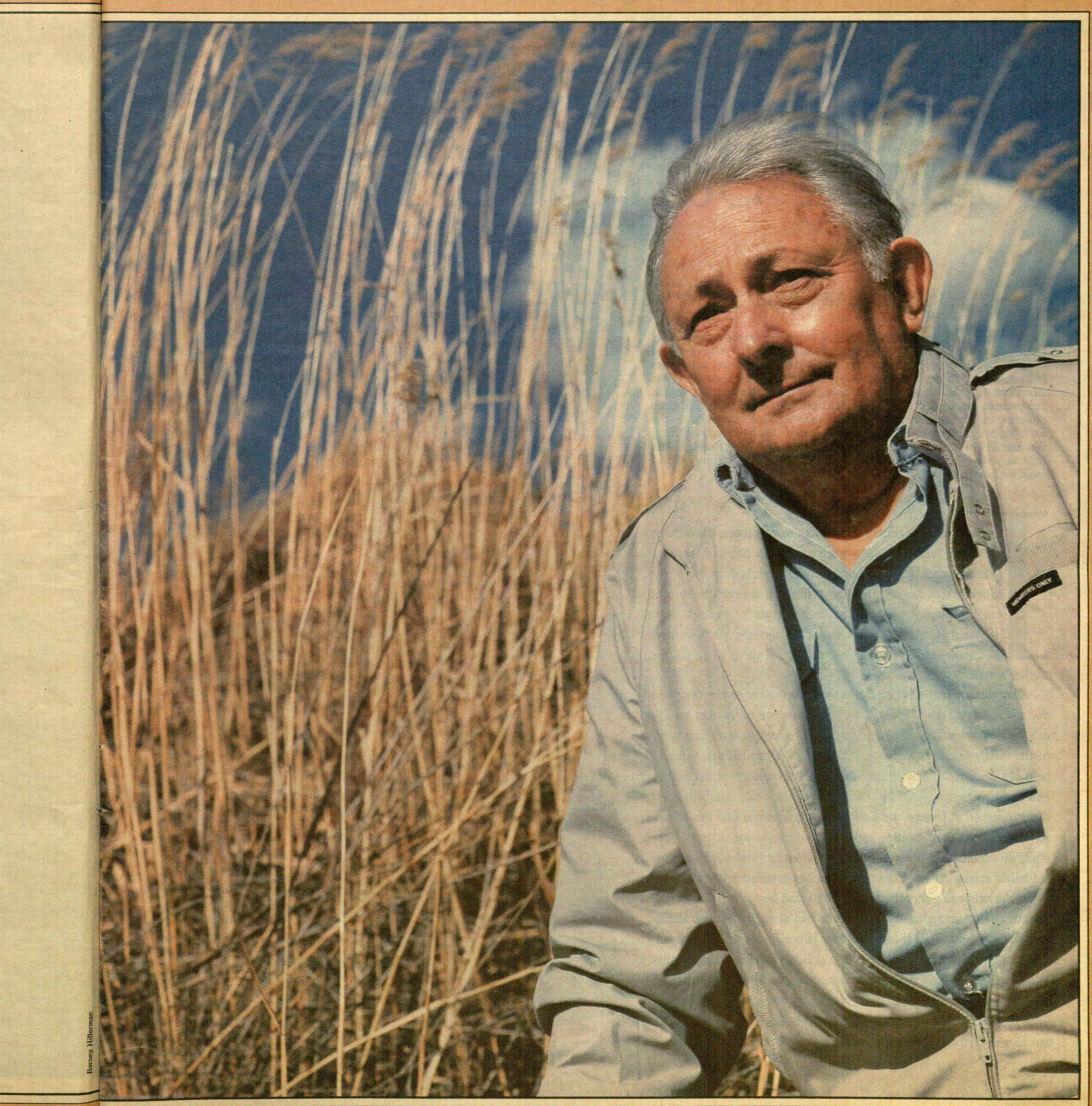
"There's my hawk," Tony Hillerman says, then slowly pushes his bulk up from the sofa and walks to the window. You follow him, looking out into the dazzling light. Your eyes adjust, taking in the New Mexican scene: meadow, houses, cottonwood grove, and, in the distance, the blocky ridge of the Sandia Mountains looming over the flat landscape of Albuquerque. Hillerman watches a kestrel fly off in a straight line from a cottonwood branch. "That hawk will sometimes sit just outside the window by my word processor when I'm working," he says.

It's a colorful image, you think, this picture of an author sitting before the winking cursor on his computer screen while a kestrel reads over his shoulder. A suggestive image. Dutifully, you jot it down. Quite a coincidence, though, that the bird would show up just now, on the day of your visit. Probably no significance to that, unless . . . Already you're wondering what Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, those two fictional officers of the Navajo Tribal Police, would make of it.

The older and more laconic Leaphorn, a disbeliever in both spirits and coincidences, would find some rational explanation for the kestrel's presence — an abundance of tasty grasshoppers, perhaps. At the same time, the bird would remind Leaphorn of his wife, Emma, who, before her sudden death a few years ago, would have helped him appreciate the grace behind this detail of the author and the falcon. Jim Chee, on the other hand, would try to reconcile the bird's natural history with its supernatural one, in the same way that he tries — not always successfully — to balance his identities as both police officer and Navajo "singer," or shaman. Yes, there would be a reasonable explanation for the bird's presence, but Chee would also search his memory for the role of *Continued on Page 40*

NORMAN BOUCHER IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR. HIS ARTICLE ABOUT MADAWASKA, MAINE, APPEARED IN THE SEPTEMBER 1 *GLOBE MAGAZINE*.

Barney Hillerman



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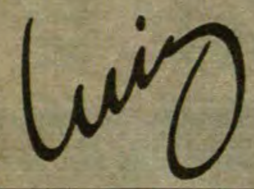

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providers in rural counties dropped by 19 percent, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a family planning research organization. In Berkshire County, for example, only two doctors still perform abortions. Most rural counties have no identified abortion services at all.

People in the right-to-life movement and others often suggest adoption as the best solution to the problem of teen-age pregnancy. But if there's one trend that social service workers around New England have seen in the past decade, it's that teen-age mothers want to keep their babies. Neither Cathy, Kate, nor Kathy M. ever considered giving her baby up. "No way am I going to go through nine months to have a kid, and then look at him and hand him over to someone else," Kate says.

So it's a service such as the Children's Health Program that will make the difference for these families over the next few years. When their children are old enough to go to school, Cathy, Kate, and Kathy M. can finish their own educations and, possibly, get jobs.

"We need more industry and more skilled training programs," says Callahan, the coordinator of family services for the Children's Health Program. "And then, we need to provide more affordable housing." Callahan also thinks that the schools can play a pivotal role, both in preventing teen-age pregnancy and in helping teen-age mothers to finish high school.

Both Callahan and Children's Health Program director Linda Small are fighters for young mothers. "I think, in some ways, that pregnant teens take a bum rap," Small says. "I have seen some very caring, responsible young mothers coming out of the program. The difficulty is that they're coming into a culture that doesn't value children and women, and it doesn't support women having children."

Months later, on a steamy afternoon in July, Cathy and Kathy M. are among a group of four mothers celebrating the awarding of their GEDs. During a reception at the Children's Health Program, tutors sip punch, share cake, and joke with the young women. There is a feeling of a future here. This fall Kathy M. enrolled at Berkshire Community College; she hopes to become a social worker. She has a new baby, and work has picked up for her husband, who has brought her to the center for the occasion.

Cathy's boyfriend jokes that, now that she has a GED, she'll *really* think she's smart. Her tutor recalls having to push her to do the work, but Cathy says she's not surprised that she made it. "I always knew I was smart," she says.

As for Kate, Callahan says, well, maybe next time, when she's ready. Four young mothers getting their GEDs may not make a dent in all the statistics about teen-age pregnancy. But Callahan knows the difference it will make in the lives of these young women and their families.

The Children's Health Program doesn't need to do everything for young families, Callahan says. "But we can help them get through it. All three of these girls are intelligent, and they're survivors." •

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West seller

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18

the kestrel in Navajo mythology. Was it an omen of some kind? What message from the spirit world did it bring, and what would this in turn reveal about a man sitting at a word processor in his Albuquerque study? Just what did this *belagaana,* or white man, know of traditional Navajo beliefs?

Finally, similar questions would nag at both Leaphorn and Chee. Curious men, they would take it upon themselves to find satisfying answers, answers that would be in harmony with both reason and the Navajo way. Is the author lying about the kestrel? If so, why? And why a kestrel? Who *is* this Tony Hillerman, anyway?

Tony Hillerman, mystery writer, is stuck. His new novel is not yet finished, even though his publisher, HarperCollins, has already been promoting it in *Publishers Weekly* and in its own spring catalog. "At the moment, I'm stuck at a kachina dance at a pueblo," he says. "I've got four characters up on a roof watching this kachina dance, and I don't quite know what they're going to do next."

He looks bemused as he says this, his voice drawling over the syllables, betraying his rural Oklahoma boyhood. Nothing in his demeanor suggests that he is feeling the slightest pressure about finishing the book. At the same time, his attitude suggests that he has complete confidence in his ability to solve the problem. It may require another trip or two to the canyons and mesas on the Navajo and Hopi reservations west of his house, but there is no place on earth he would rather be than out in that country, which he describes as "too dry, too broken, too empty, too strong for anyone's comfort." In *Hillerman Country,* a travel book published last month, he writes lovingly of this "high and dry" place, a landscape "lacking the rainfall that makes valleys green, cattle fat, and people rich."

Of course, his publisher will accommodate him — and several weeks later reschedules the unfinished mystery for 1993. Since 1970, HarperCollins (formerly Harper & Row) has published 10 novels about Hillerman's Navajo cops, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. Over the same period, Hillerman's following has grown from a small cult to a mass audience. His last three novels have made *The New York Times* best-seller list. Michael Dorris, author of *The Broken Cord* and a professor of Native American studies at Dartmouth, has compared Hillerman's novels to "the best work of Ruth Rendell, P. D. James, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle," noting in a review of Hillerman's first best seller, *A Thief of Time,* that his work "transcends the conventions of the simple whodunit and plunges the reader into a fully realized world, populated by complex, fascinating characters."

Hillerman's appeal promises to spread even more in January, when *The Dark Wind,* the first movie to be made from any of his novels, is scheduled for release. Directed by Errol

Morris, known for his documentary *The Thin Blue Line,* and produced by Robert Redford, who owns the movie rights to all of Hillerman's Navajo police novels, the movie will star Fred Ward as Joe Leaphorn and Lou Diamond Phillips as Jim Chee.

"It used to be that I got two kinds of readers," Hillerman says, "mystery fans and desert rats. Now I've got a few desert rats and mystery readers and a lot of people who say, 'I don't usually read mysteries.'" No doubt, the Joe Leaphorn/Jim Chee books, steeped as they are in Navajo lore and ritual, appeal to the same audience that made *Dances with Wolves* such a successful movie. Hillerman's novels describe complex Navajo religious ceremonies, such as the Enemy Way and the *Yeibichai,* or Night Chant. Readers learn dozens of details of Navajo life, which, in Hillerman's eyes, revolves around family and tradition, an emphasis that has coincidentally been prominent in his own life. One of the worst insults possible to Navajos, in fact — and, one suspects, the worst in Hillerman's eyes, as well — is to be accused of having no relatives or of not caring for ones they have.

Although such ethnography might seem preachy or boring, Hillerman's mysteries are neither. He never forgets that, above all, he is telling a good story. The Navajo texture is seldom decorative; it is integral to Hillerman's plots. Officer Jim Chee and Lt. Joe Leaphorn often succeed where the FBI fails because their knowledge of the Navajo way, absorbed over a lifetime on the reservation, highlights clues that the *belagaana* miss. For example, in one novel, the FBI tries to hide a city-raised Navajo on the reservation as part of the Witness Protection Program; the agents fail to realize that his ignorance of Navajo ways will make him as obvious and out of place there as any white man.

Most important, though, is that the fully realized Navajo world in Hillerman's novels never slips into the soft focus of noble-savage sentimentality. One character type that invariably irritates both Leaphorn and Chee is the "Indian-lover," the young white man or wom-

Continued on Page 49

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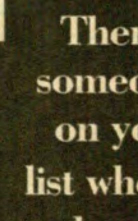

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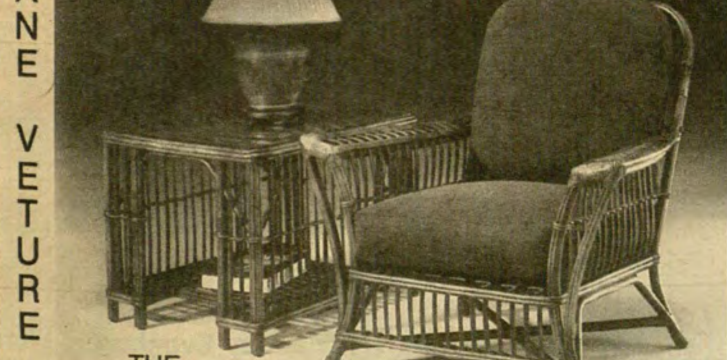
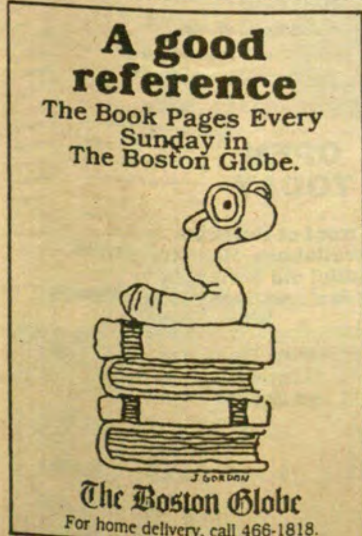




West seller

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 41

an, usually dressed in denim jacket and headband, who has decided to go Indian. As Hillerman describes it, life on the Big Reservation, which occupies an area of New Mexico and Arizona that's larger than all of New England, is a lumpy mix of modern and traditional, white and native. Chee's trailer, for instance, contains both a battery-powered television and the ingredients necessary to perform a Blessing Way ritual.

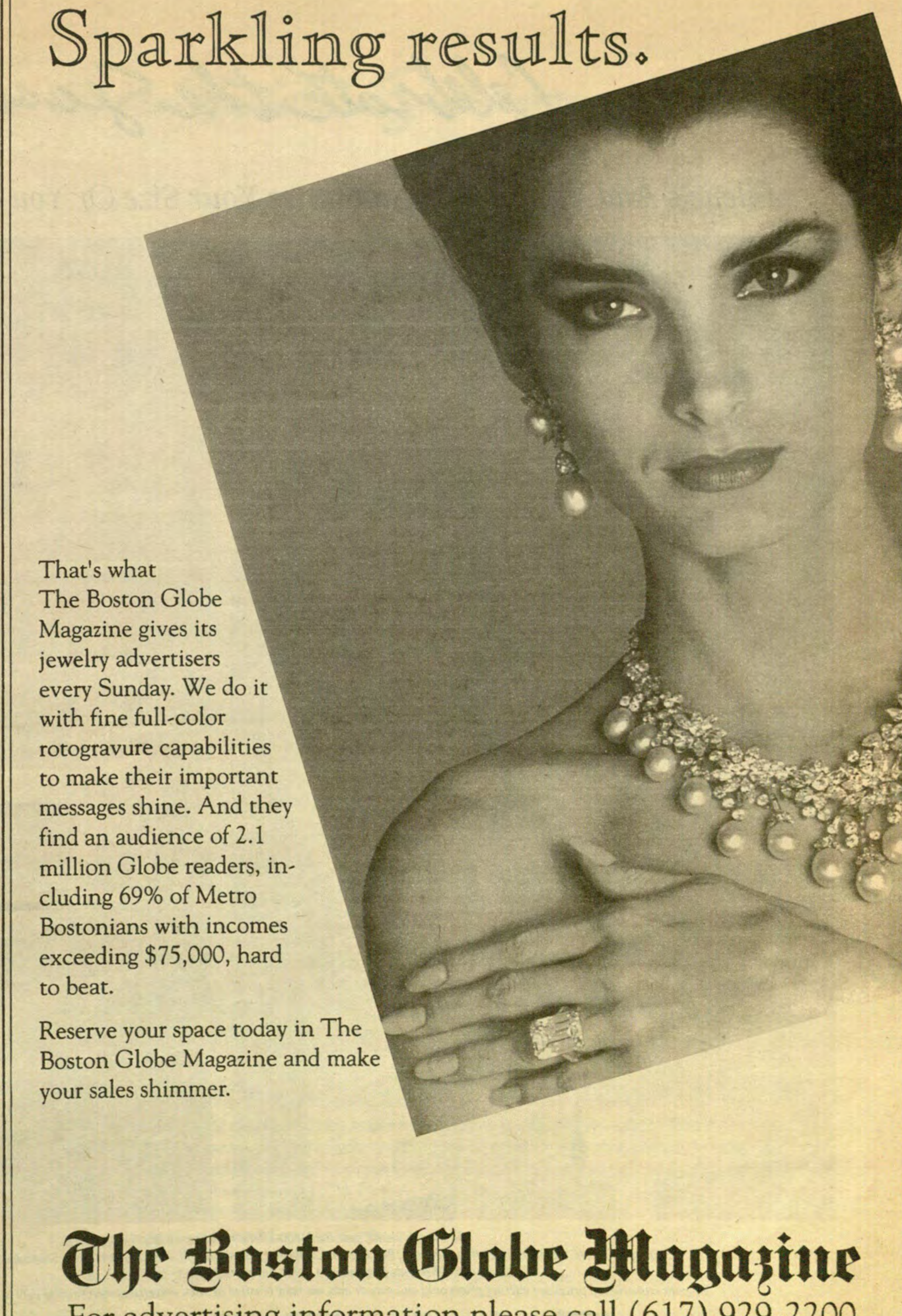
Such details provide the Hillerman books with much of their authenticity and wit. In them, Navajos examine the sky closely for signs of rain, but they also check their hunches against the forecasts of the TV weatherman. Leaphorn hates whiskey not so much because it is the white man's poison but because so much of a Navajo tribal policeman's time is taken up dealing with drunken Navajos. "There's so much romanticizing of Indians," Hillerman says, "and the Indians are very sensitive to it. They laugh at the antilitter commercial that was on television a few years ago, the one with the Indian standing in all that trash by the side of the road and shedding a tear over it. They know that the reservation is one of the worst places around when it comes to littering."

Besides being enormously popular, Hillerman's books have won most of the big mystery-novel prizes, including the Edgar Allan Poe Award. He has also been invited to speak at various gatherings of anthropologists and archeologists — even though members of these professions are often the heavies in his mysteries. Perceived as an expert on Navajos, Hillerman has been consulted by lawyers working on cases involving "skinwalkers," or Navajo witches, and when two members of the Navajo Tribal Police were murdered near Arizona's Monument Valley a while back, reporters called Tony Hillerman for quotes.

But Hillerman insists that most important to him, as an Anglo, has been the acclaim his books have received on reservations throughout the Southwest. "Boy, was I sensitive to the Navajo reaction to my books at first," Hillerman says. "I was very uneasy that I'd screw something up." He found, however, that the average Navajo does not know a great deal about the tribe's traditional beliefs. "The average Navajo," he says, "is like the average Catholic or Presbyterian. He calls himself a Presbyterian or a Catholic or whatever, but he doesn't know anything about the religion and sends you to a parish priest to find out about it."

Still, Hillerman does not underestimate the influence of tribal religious beliefs on most reservation Indians. In fact, his novels are used in a number of Indian schools to help kindle students' interest in just such beliefs. His popularity among Navajos has been so great that in 1987 he was asked to lead the parade at the Navajo Nation Fair, by far the biggest annual social event on the reservation.

Other tribes have been more wary of Hillerman's activities. A few of his plots have involved such Pueblo tribes as the Hopi and the Zuni, which discourage members from discussing their complicated religion with outsiders. "In



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Barney Hillerman

Tony Hillerman on a reservation in New Mexico. In addition to presenting a wealth of information about Indian spirituality and customs, his novels raise issues of class and politics, all within the context of a page turner.

1973," he says, "after *Dance Hall of the Dead,* the students at the Zuni high school asked me to be their commencement speaker. Everything went fine until after I'd delivered my speech. I was informed that some of the tribal elders wanted to talk to me. I was led into the principal's office, where six old men were sitting with copies of my book. They had a whole list of questions prepared, most of them asking where did you get this information or that detail. Fortunately, I was able to cite an academic source for each one. What they were doing was trying to find out whether anyone in the villages had been talking to me" — and thus violating the tribe's religious secrecy.

Yet on occasion the Zunis have asked Hillerman for help in dealing with the white world. "Not long ago, a bar in Albuquerque wanted to open something called the Kachina Lounge,'' he says. Among Pueblo tribes, kachinas are the physical representations of specific religious spirits and so are treated with great respect. "The ad in the newspaper had a kachina carrying a tray of beer. This is a highly offensive image to the Zunis, and one of them called me about it." Hillerman got the ad changed.

One reason for Hillerman's wide popularity is that he manages to do so much without violating the conventions of the mystery genre. In addition to presenting a wealth of information about Indian spirituality and customs, his novels raise issues of class and politics — all within the context of a beautifully written page turner. Yet the murders in these books *do* have a moral point, no matter how cleverly disguised. Crimes in a Hillerman mystery usually result from dislocations between the white and Navajo worlds. Greed, for instance, and the different ways it is perceived in the two cultures can be crucial to solving a crime.

"I think my books are as much about love as they are about crime," Hillerman has said, and, indeed, the highest good in a Hillerman novel seems to be tolerance and respect. His novels are above all chronicles of the struggle toward *hohzho* — a Navajo concept combining order, harmony, and beauty — in a confusing world of cultural chaos and inexplicable violence. Hillerman's novels are not whodunits as much as *why*dunits.

"There are still a lot of mystery readers who read for the puzzle, primarily," Hillerman says in a long interview with Ernie Bulow, his collaborator in *Talking Mysteries,* a book just published by University of New Mexico Press. "They want the whodunit, a series of clues and a story in which they engage in this great game with the writer. . . . Frankly, I never liked to read that kind of stuff myself, and I can't write it. But I'd say more than half the readers of mysteries are looking for that, and it bothers them that I don't play that game."

Tony Hillerman saw his first Navajos in the summer of 1945. In *Hillerman Country,* a coffee-table book illustrated with photographs by his late brother, Barney, Hillerman

describes himself at the time as "an infantryman home from Europe, with a patch over my left eye, a stiff leg, and a sixty-day convalescent furlough." Aside from his tour in the Army, Hillerman had spent all 20 years of his young life in rural Oklahoma. He had never been west of El Paso.

A chance meeting at a USO dance in Oklahoma City led to a job hauling a load of oil-drilling equipment to a destination in the western New Mexico section of the Navajo reservation. "I know now," Hillerman writes, "that those first Navajos encountered were participants in a curing ceremony. . . . All I knew then was what I saw — a group of mounted men and women emerging from a thicket of pinyon and juniper and crossing the dirt road ahead of my truck. There was a trail there, I'm sure, but it wasn't visible from where I stopped, and the riders seemed to emerge as if by magic from that great cliff of pink-and-salmon sandstone that forms the southwest wall of Mariano Mesa. Some of them were in ceremonial attire, painted and dressed as warriors returning from the mythic raid on which the ceremony is based. The lead rider carried a feathered pole to which a long-billed cap was tied. I learned later that the patients being cured were two marines who had come home to their people from the battle of Okinawa. I presume the cap was a trophy taken from a Japanese soldier."

Later, Hillerman learned that the purpose of this particular ceremony was to cleanse the returning Navajo soldiers of their contact with non-Navajo cultures.

Quite a profound sight for a young Catholic Okie redneck unsure of his future. The moment foreshadowed what remains Hillerman's obsessions 46 years later. The incongruities — the magical appearance of a group of traditionally dressed Navajos in front of a truck hauling oil-drilling equipment; the violent symbol in such a setting of a Japanese soldier's hat from one of the bloodiest battles of World War II — suggest many of the novels' themes. And the element of landscape (the careful description of the "great cliff of pink-and-salmon sandstone") foreshadows the towering presence of the natural world in the Chee/Leaphorn mysteries; this world, animated by spirits, not only provides the books with their setting and tone but often plays a role in the narrative as well.

It would be 25 years, though, before Hillerman could put this experience directly to use. Born on May 27, 1925, Hillerman grew up with his older brother and sister in the tiny hamlet of Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, which was nothing more than a crossroads outside the town of Konawa. Sacred Heart's main features were a cotton gin, a filling station, and a general store run by Hillerman's father. On the hill above Sacred Heart were a Catholic church — a somewhat unusual building for the South — and a largely abandoned Benedictine monastery that stood near a girls' boarding school run by the Sisters of Mercy. The nearest library was 35 miles away.

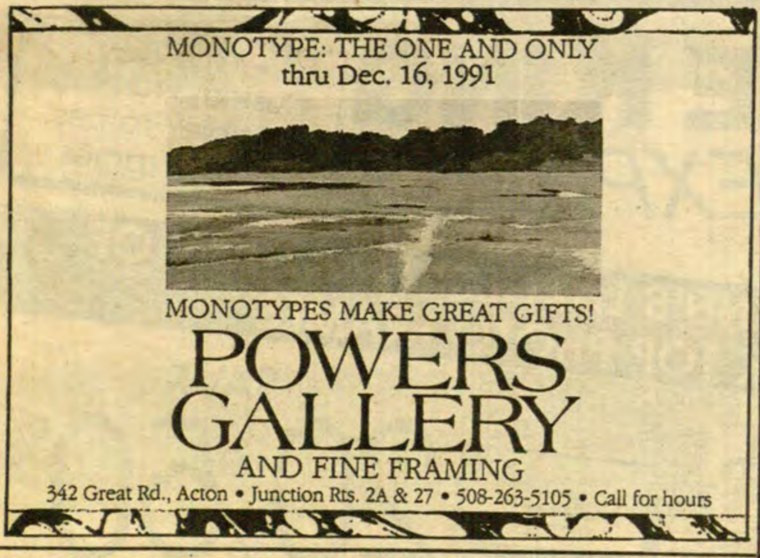
"I remember rolling hills, red clay, a lot of gullies, and scrub oak," Hillerman says, adding that the only difference between the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* and his neighbors in Sacred Heart was that the Joads had enough money to get to California. The Hillermans supported themselves with the store and by growing a few crops. Many of their neighbors were Pottawatomie or Seminole Indians.

Wanting the best possible education for their son, Hillerman's parents somehow persuaded the Sisters of Mercy to accept Tony into the girls' boarding school. Thus he grew up Catholic in the Protestant Bible Belt, a white kid surrounded by Indians, and a boy in an all-girls' school — all of which, he says, helped him later to establish an immediate rapport with Southwestern tribes.

"Growing up that way," Hillerman says, "you really appreciate what it's like being a minority. For example, trying to practice being a Catholic while surrounded by all these Protestants made you sympathize with the poor Pueblo Indians who try to maintain some dignity in their ceremonies with us rednecks staring at them all the time. I really appreciate cultures based on faith."

Hillerman remembers the deep sense of inferiority that went along with being a country boy, a memory that he insists has been key in his relationships on the Navajo reservation. "When you're a kid," he says, "you identify 'us and them.' In our case, the country boys were us and the town boys were them. As country boys, we wore bib overalls, didn't know how to shoot pool, and didn't know how to use a phone. This difference was far more important than any racial differences between me and the Pottawatomies. Later, when I started visiting the trading posts on the Navajo reservation, I realized these were the same damn people who were sitting on the front porch at my daddy's store. They're sitting around thinking outsiders are looking down their noses at them. I know just what to say to these people."

After his 1945 experience driving oil-drilling equipment to New Mexico, Hillerman studied journalism under the GI Bill. In 1948 he married his University of Oklahoma classmate Marie Unzner, and by



1952 he had become chief of a two-man UPI bureau in Santa Fe. Two years later, he moved to *The New Mexican*, working his way up to executive editor and thus fulfilling a longtime ambition to edit a capital-city newspaper.

"Santa Fe is such a weird place for someone like me, who's basically a redneck cotton farmer. I had a Pulitzer award winner writing a column for me at $10 a week. I had a National Book Award winner as book editor for $40 a week."

Meanwhile, Hillerman harbored the dream, common at the time, of writing The Great American Novel. "In 1962, Marie said, 'If you're going to do it, you ought to do it,' " Hillerman recalls. He was about to turn 37. He had six children. He enrolled in the graduate writing program at the University of New Mexico, lined up a part-time job there, quit as editor of *The New Mexican*, and moved his family to Albuquerque. "I wanted to be an author, capital A," he says. "I had no great social purpose. I'd been a reporter and an editor for 17 years, and now I just wanted to get a book published."

The book came slowly. He finished his academic work at the university and took a job teaching in the journalism department. He decided he would hold off writing the American equivalent of *War and Peace* for the moment and work on something a little easier — a mystery, perhaps. The idea came to him to set a novel on the Navajo reservation because, if he couldn't keep the plot interesting, at least "there would be all this Navajo stuff" to engage the reader's attention. He remembered editing a story once about the fatal shooting of a tribal policeman on the Jicarilla Apache reservation, a man who had apparently been a tough and well-respected cop. Maybe the story would have a tribal policeman in it.

"One day," Hillerman recalls, "you say, 'All right, I gotta quit stalling.' You can't quite get to work, because you just know that what you're going to write is going to get rejected. So you finally write a first chapter, and you write it over and over and over. You still don't have a book, but you've got a really great first chapter."

It took Hillerman three years to move beyond that first chapter. When he began sending the manuscript around, his agent told him to stick to nonfiction, but if he really *had* to write a novel, she said, for God's sake, take out all that Indian stuff. A sympathetic editor at Harper & Row gave him advice on rewriting what he had submitted, and in 1970 *The Blessing Way*, introducing Lt. Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police, was published to high praise. Its first chapter, Hillerman says, looks nothing like the one he had worked on for so long three years earlier.

Since then, the novels have followed at a steady rate. After two more Leaphorn mysteries, Hillerman began to feel limited by Leaphorn's strictly logical and somewhat jaundiced viewpoint. *People of Darkness* replaced Leaphorn with Officer Jim Chee, an aspiring shaman from the eastern "Checkerboard" section of the reservation, where non-Navajo influences are strongest. Then the novels took on a new, more complex shape. "I was signing books someplace," Hillerman says. "It may have been Boston. Anyway, some very nice lady came up to me and asked why I used two different detectives. She said, 'Frankly, I can't tell them apart.' You hear a lot of things when you're signing books, but that one was like a spear in the heart. I came back and wrote *Skinwalkers*."

Published in 1986, *Skinwalkers* brought Leaphorn and Chee together to work on the same case. They have been in all three books since then, developing individually and in contrast to each other. Coincidentally, the three books have been Hillerman's only best sellers.

Ten mysteries after quitting his editor's job, Hillerman still has not written the American *War and Peace*. The tug of mysteries remains too strong. Right now, for example, four characters wait for him atop that pueblo roof. In *Talking Mysteries*, Hillerman writes about a Navajo librarian with whom he once discussed the work of the Indian novelists Leslie Silko, James Welch, and Scott Momaday. Their work existed on a plane far above his, he told the librarian. "They are artists," he remembers saying. "I am a storyteller."

The librarian responded: "Yes. 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 Tsossies and Begays, and again we say, 'Yes, this is us. But now we win.' Like the stories our grandmother used to tell us, they make us feel good about being Navajos."

"As a fellow country boy," Hillerman says, "I am proud of that." •

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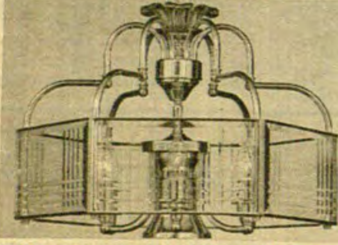

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