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Tony Hillerman has written numerous best-selling detective stories. Robert Redford's production company, Wildwood, has purchased the movie rights to many of Hillerman's books.

COVER STORY

Chief of Detectives

Unraveling the mystery of
Tony Hillerman
by Patricia J. O'Connor
Photograph by Barney Hillerman

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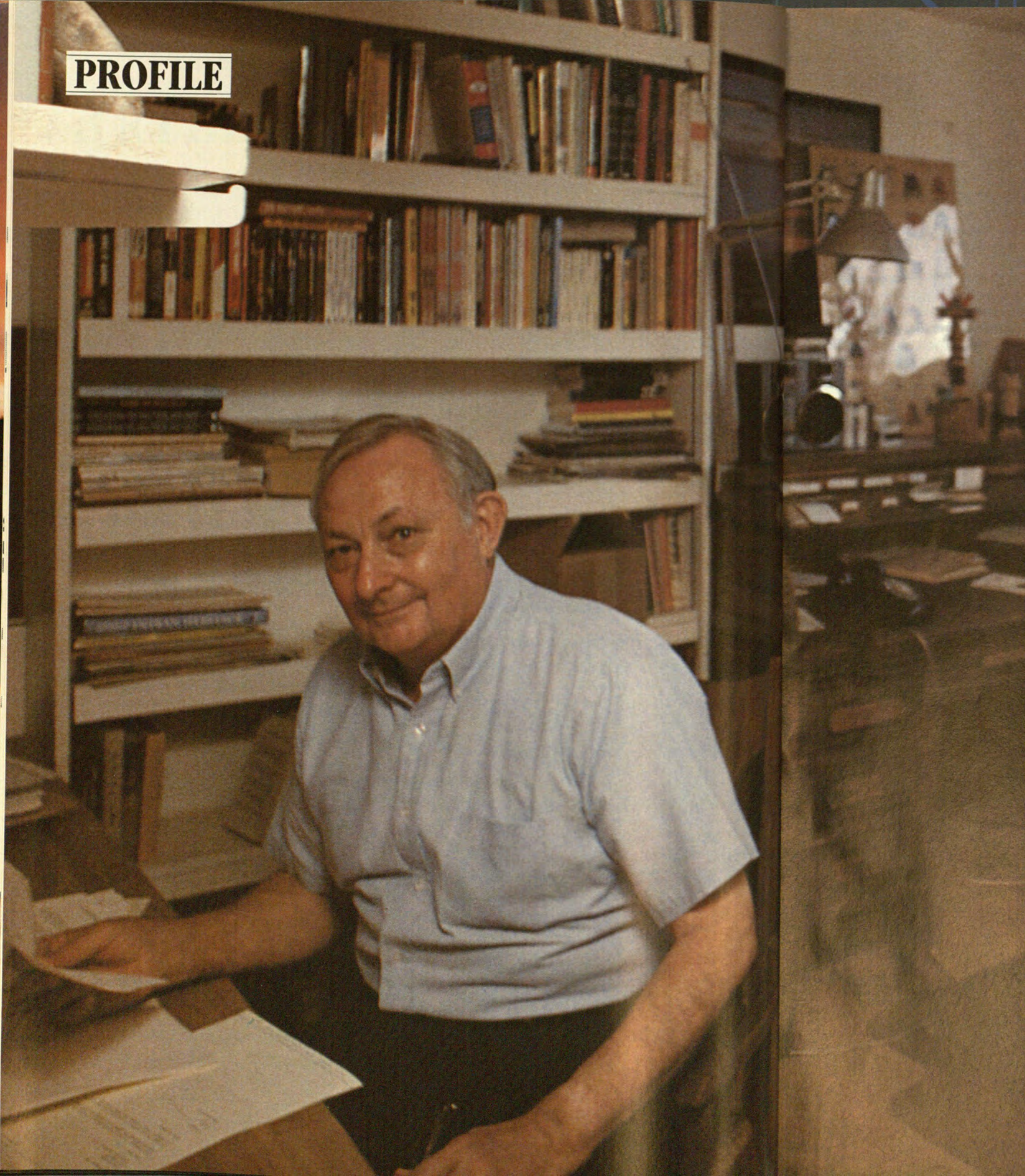


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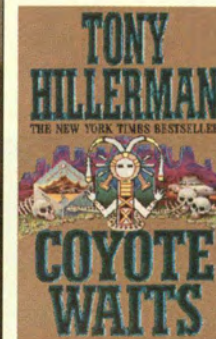
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Chief of Detectives

Unraveling the mystery
of Tony Hillerman



TONY HILLERMAN identifies himself as a country boy. *The New York Times* identifies him as a best-selling novelist. He's published nearly 20 books, 11 of them mysteries set on the Navajo Reservation. They have

such alluring titles as *The Blessing Way*, *Talking God* and *Coyote Waits*. He has won high praise for his Navajo country tales including the Edgar Allan Poe Award for *Dance Hall of the Dead* and France's Grand Prix de Littérature Policière. He has been named Grand Master 1991 by the Mystery Writers of America and this year serves as its president. In addition, Hillerman has lent his pen to several books of non-fiction, including *Hillerman Country*, a book celebrating Hillerman's love of the land where his characters live, featuring photos taken by his late brother Barney. It is the land, the people (the *Dineh*) and his fast-paced prose that make Hillerman and his mysteries famous. His books are translated into 17 languages around the world. They are on tape, in classrooms and libraries and soon they will be on movie screens. Pretty cosmopolitan for a self-proclaimed red-neck from a small cotton-gin town in Oklahoma.

Hillerman's collar hasn't been blue in several decades and his neck is relatively safe from the ravages of the sun. The gentlemanly writer lives and works in a contemporary adobe house in Albuquerque's North Valley, the

Private eye: Tony Hillerman at work in his Albuquerque study.

closest thing to the country you can get in New Mexico's largest city. Mount Taylor is to his west. The Sandia Mountains are to his east. Both hold a special meaning to the Native Americans he writes about. The jagged peaks are clearly visible from his office windows. And the landscape he has made famous stretches 25,000 square miles west, north and south of his circular drive. Perhaps Hillerman's surroundings keep him grounded as much as his memories of rural Oklahoma do. In any case, he's not the kind of novelist to get his typewriter ribbon in a tangle just because Robert Redford and his company, Wildwood, are making several of his books into films.

Even as Hillerman types at his word processor, Redford's staff of talent scouts are scouring reservations in the Southwest searching for Native American actors who can play the parts of Hillerman's famous detectives, Lt. Joe Leaphorn and Officer Jim Chee, in the film version of *Thief of Time*.

It is the third such search and the second film. The first is based on Hillerman's *The Dark Wind*. Redford so much wanted Native Americans to play the leads that he reopened casting offices to find the right actors. Director Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*), however, decided on actors Lou Diamond Phillips for Chee and Fred Ward for Leaphorn. Hillerman himself played a cameo role as a warden at a jail where Chee (Phillips), comes to look after a prisoner. "He's quite good," says producer Patrick Markey. Sadly, the scene ended up on the cutting room floor. Hillerman is nonplussed, an attitude Markey finds refreshing. The author may have his opinions about movies—he generally doesn't like them—but he wouldn't presume to advise the likes of Redford or Mar-

BY PATRICIA O'CONNOR

PROFILE

key. "Say you're a sculptor and somebody wants to do a watercolor of your sculpture. They're whole different forms of art and take a whole different body of knowledge. I'd be a total idiot to try to get into that field. Besides, I'm not interested," says Hillerman.

Oh, but things got interesting on the set of *The Dark Wind*. Of the entire series of Hillerman mysteries, it is the only one to include the Hopi Nation. And, frankly, many Hopi did not want the honor. The climax takes place dur-

ing a tribal ceremony. Hillerman was careful not to reveal too much of the people's private traditions. But film is more literal than language. The Hopi Tribal Council and religious leaders launched a vociferous protest against the moviemakers.

Producers agreed to rewrite the script and hired a Hopi advisor, Eric Polingyouma, to help them re-create the ceremonial scenes. They hired Navajo and Hopi actors as extras. And the Wildwood company created a Native

American apprenticeship program through which they trained locals to be the behind-the-scenes crew. These are skills they may use when Wildwood comes back to make more films from Hillerman's books. Everyone seemed happy.

With all the concessions and negotiations, it still seems *The Dark Wind* was born under a dark cloud. Currently, the film is awaiting distribution because Carolco, the company scheduled to manage the release, is in financial

trouble. Then, last February, the Shungopavi Village, a small, more traditional Hopi faction, filed a defamation suit against actor/director Robert Redford and Hopi Chairman Vernon Masayesva for compromising traditional and secret religious ceremonies and rituals in the making of *The Dark Wind*.

Markey hopes that this, too, will pass. Meanwhile, Wildwood will move on to *Thief of Time* with Redford as director. And when it is finished, to *Skinwalkers*. Markey hopes to make six of

Hillerman's novels into films.

Hillerman is sympathetic with both sides. He knows the folks from Hollywood did all they could to please the Hopi and Navajo. But he can understand how it must feel to the Shungo-

Hillerman is brutally honest about some aspects of life on the reservation. His characters suffer, as many Native Americans do, from alcoholism, diabetes, glaucoma, crooked teeth, bowed legs—evidence of poverty and poor

Hillerman gives us tastes of healing rituals, dances, sand-painting ceremonies, but he never reveals too much. Like a skilled striptease artist, he pulls back the veil only so far

pavi to have a bunch of city boys poking around in their private world.

Truth is, Hillerman is nothing if not respectful of Native American culture. Why else would he choose to tell his tales through tribal policemen, two country underdogs who solve murder cases under the noses of the white FBI agents? But Leaphorn and Chee have what the by-the-book guys in starched shirts don't have—an understanding and respect for the Dineh and the *Din-etab*, the holy Navajo landscape.

Hillerman would like to call his books thinking man's mysteries—not that it takes a genius to figure out whodunit. A seasoned mystery reader can usually guess midway through the book. There is more to his mystery than just a crime.

Hillerman introduces us to characters who believe whole heartedly in the power of witches and skinwalkers—the Navajo version of werewolves. He presents us with new rules of etiquette. A good Navajo, for example, never knocks. He lets us in on inside jokes and old Navajo sayings, such as "a busybody is one who tells the sheep where to graze." Hillerman tells us about *Yeibichbais* (Talking Gods) and Listening Women and gives us tastes of healing rituals, dances, sand-painting ceremonies, but he never reveals too much. Like a skilled striptease artist, he pulls back the veil only so far.

Lou Diamond Phillips and Arlene Bowman in the film version of Hillerman's *The Dark Wind*.

health. But, in Hillerman's books, the Navajo come out ahead, in spite of the odds. That's what makes Hillerman such a hit on the "rez". Young and old alike, the Dineh read Hillerman's novels as if they were starved for words. You'd never know they were written by a *belagana*, a white guy. And, to show their appreciation, the Navajo Nation presented Hillerman with the "Special Friend to the Dineh" award in 1987 for "authentically portraying the strength and dignity of traditional Navajo culture."

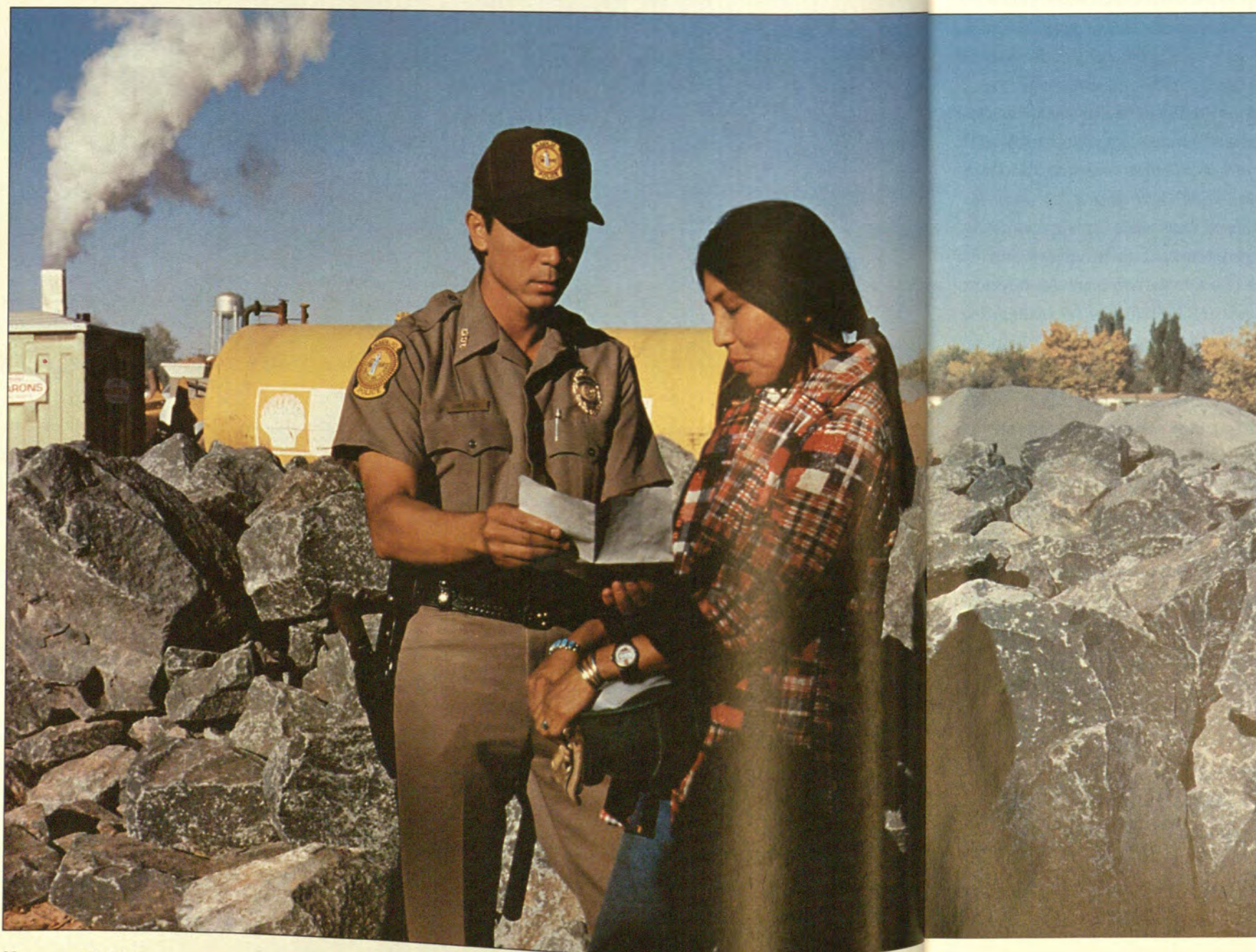
"That means more to me than just about anything else," says Hillerman.

To understand the Navajo culture, Hillerman had to understand the Navajo's relationship to the land and nature. And, almost without his conscious effort, Nature became as compelling a character in his books as any who have two legs.

"Frequently the landscape is crucial to the plot. For example, this wouldn't happen if this place weren't so isolated, if there were phone lines or a highway here," explains Hillerman. Our heroes are confounded by strong winds that obscure a villain's footprints in the dry earth. Or they are aided by rain that makes it possible for trucks to leave incriminating tread marks.

Being in balance with nature is essential in the Navajo world if the people are to preserve their *hozro*, says Hillerman. "Hozro is being in peace and harmony with whatever is happening that you can't change. Say there's a

(Continued on page 44)



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TONY HILLERMAN

(Continued from page 33)

big, heavy drought. The Presbyterian or the Zuni would pray for rain. The traditional Navajo would pray to be in harmony with drought," he says. A crime on the reservation, then, is more than a violation of local or federal law. It may be perceived by the Navajo as a disruption of nearly cosmic proportions.

Nature comes back into balance often in subtle and mysterious ways. Consequently, it's rare that either Chee or Leaphorn have to pull the trigger to do away with the bad guy. Nature, be it in the form of an angry mob at a Zuni ceremonial dance or a young mother crazed by the death of her child, moves in and does what is necessary to right the wrong and get the Dineh back into the Beauty Way. And rarely do Chee or Leaphorn ask for or get any credit for having solved the mysteries. Too much praise messes with your hozro, says Hillerman.

Hillerman explains: "My friend's brother used to be a really good, hot shot, fanatical rodeo cowboy—a Navajo. There was a rodeo at the Navajo Nation Fair in Window Rock. And I asked [my friend] if his brother was going to win the belt. He said, 'No. He's getting to be too good. He's getting out of hozro. He's getting out of sync. He's winning too much.'"

So how does Hillerman, winner of many awards and the subject of laudatory reviews keep his hozro in check? He plays poker.

Every Tuesday night for 17 years, he and a group of male friends get together for cards and conversation. It's male bonding and ego control, says Jim Belshaw, columnist for the *Albuquerque Journal*. The men take turns ribbing each other for deeds both noble and ridiculous. "Hillerman is the mega-star, so he gets the mega-barbs," says Belshaw, a former student in Hillerman's journalism classes. Not that Hillerman is any more likely to become a braggart than he is to use an unnecessary adverb. "He and Marie are genuine people," says Belshaw.

Marie still imagines that all this fame and fortune is painful for her husband. She goes with him to speaking engagements to offer moral support. "She cannot believe that I have this thick streak of ham in me," Hillerman says. But he doesn't take all the attention seriously—not even the full-page ads for

his books in *Newsweek*. "It probably would have [changed the way I see myself] if it started happening while I was in my thirties. But I'm 67. When you look at yourself and you see a 67-year-old who's overweight, you've got to be wise enough to know all this doesn't make a damn bit of difference."

Perhaps it's hard to be anything but humble having grown up as he did in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, population 60. His best friends were Potawatome and Seminole Indians—or county boys. Hillerman shared an economic and social status with his Indian friends that was more binding in his opinion than blood or religion. In *Talking Mysteries* (The University of New Mexico Press), Ernie Bulow's interviews with Tony Hillerman, Hillerman recalls:

"The town boys got their hair cut in barber shops, knew how to shoot pool, didn't carry their lunch in sacks, wore belt pants and low cuts instead of overalls and work shoes, had spending money, knew about calling people on telephones and were otherwise urbane and sophisticated.

"When I met the Navajos I now so often write about, I recognized kindred spirits. Country boys. More of us. Folks among whom I felt at ease. When I saw them standing around the fringes of a Zuni Shalako ceremonial, dressed in their 'going to town' velvet and silver but still looking ill at ease, bashful, and very much impressed by the power of the town-boy neighbors, I saw myself, and my kinfolks and my country friends."

Of course, as a country boy, Hillerman never considered becoming a writer. He didn't expect to graduate from college either. When World War II broke out, he enlisted. He was in France only four months when something exploded underneath him. Both legs were broken and one eye was severely burned. He spent months in a body cast in an army hospital where he and other wounded compatriots played poker day and night.

Hillerman was awarded the silver star and bronze star and purple heart for his pains. To celebrate the local hero, a feature writer for the *Daily Oklaboman* wrote an article about Hillerman based on letters Hillerman had sent home to his mother. When he got

IT'S MONUMENTAL. BUT YOU CAN'T SHOP THERE.

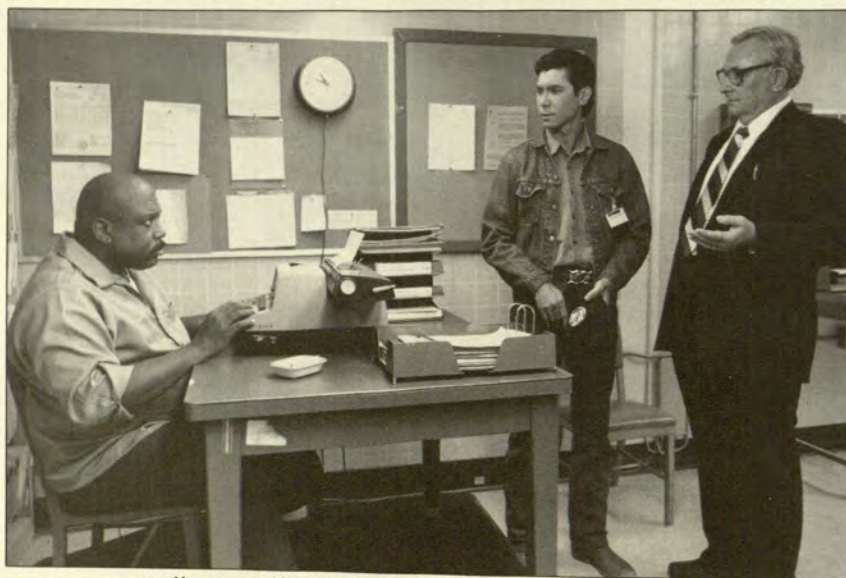


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TONY HILLERMAN



Hillerman (far right) as a prison warden in a scene that was cut from *The Dark Wind*.

home there was a message waiting for him to call the journalist. "You should be a writer," she told him.

While on a convalescent furlough, Hillerman took a job driving a truckload of pipe from Oklahoma City to an oil drilling site in Arizona on the Navajo reservations. "Suddenly, a party of about twenty Navajo horsemen (and women) emerged from the pinons and crossed the dirt road in front of me. They were wearing ceremonial regalia and the man in front was carrying something tied to a coup stick," he recalls in *Talking Mysteries*. He found out later that the Navajo were performing an Enemy Way ceremony to help return their war-weary men to the Beauty Way. "I was fascinated," he writes. And he was moved. With a bum leg of his own and a patch over one eye, Hillerman could have benefitted from such a ceremony. He was inspired to learn more about the Navajo, which he eventually did by reading anthropology books in the stacks at the University of New Mexico library years later. And like the good writer he was meant to be, Hillerman filed that scene in the back of his mind. Twenty-five years later, he used it as the glue that held together the plot for his first Navajo mystery, *The Blessing Way*.

After gaining a journalism degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1948, Hillerman landed a newswriting job in Texas, then moved to a paper in Oklahoma before coming to rest with United Press International. He was of-

fered the post of bureau manager and political reporter in Santa Fe in 1952, which brought him closer to the Indians he now so dearly loves. In 1954 he took a job as political reporter, then as editor, for the *New Mexican*, the Santa Fe paper.

Hillerman maintains that working as a journalist was the best training he could have had for becoming a novelist. "For one thing, when you're a journalist you write something like six million words a year. You learn the language.

"Even more important, you're not inside your apartment looking at the inside of your skull. You're at the fire talking to the kid who saved himself instead of going back inside and getting his brother. You're talking to the guy who just killed his wife and is handcuffed and is now a mixture of defiance and dread and horror at what he's done. You're talking to the guy on death row. Tomorrow he's going to be dead and he knows it. . . . You're really getting the raw material of life as a journalist. You get more of that experience in a month as a reporter than the ivory tower writers get in their life."

Writing hard news during the day and fiction at night was next to impossible, however. He did little more than fiddle with the first chapter for his would-be novel and feel depressed. Then Marie said, "Tony, if you're going to do it, you better do it."

Hillerman was 38 years old when he quit the *New Mexican* and took a part-

time job as an assistant to the president of the University of New Mexico and set to writing in earnest. He also signed up as a graduate student in English literature with the intention of learning how to write better. Soon, the first chapter that had been accumulating dust and punitive marks from Hillerman's own red pen started to grow.

"I was going to write the redneck version of *Catcher in the Rye*," he says. But he believed he lacked the skills to do it justice. So he thought he'd start over with something easier—a mystery. He started with *The Blessing Way*.

"It took a long time to write it because I'd be overcome by sane moments when it dawned on me I was wasting my time." When he finally finished, he sent it to his agent, who had helped him sell his nonfiction. She said, "Get rid of all that Indian stuff."

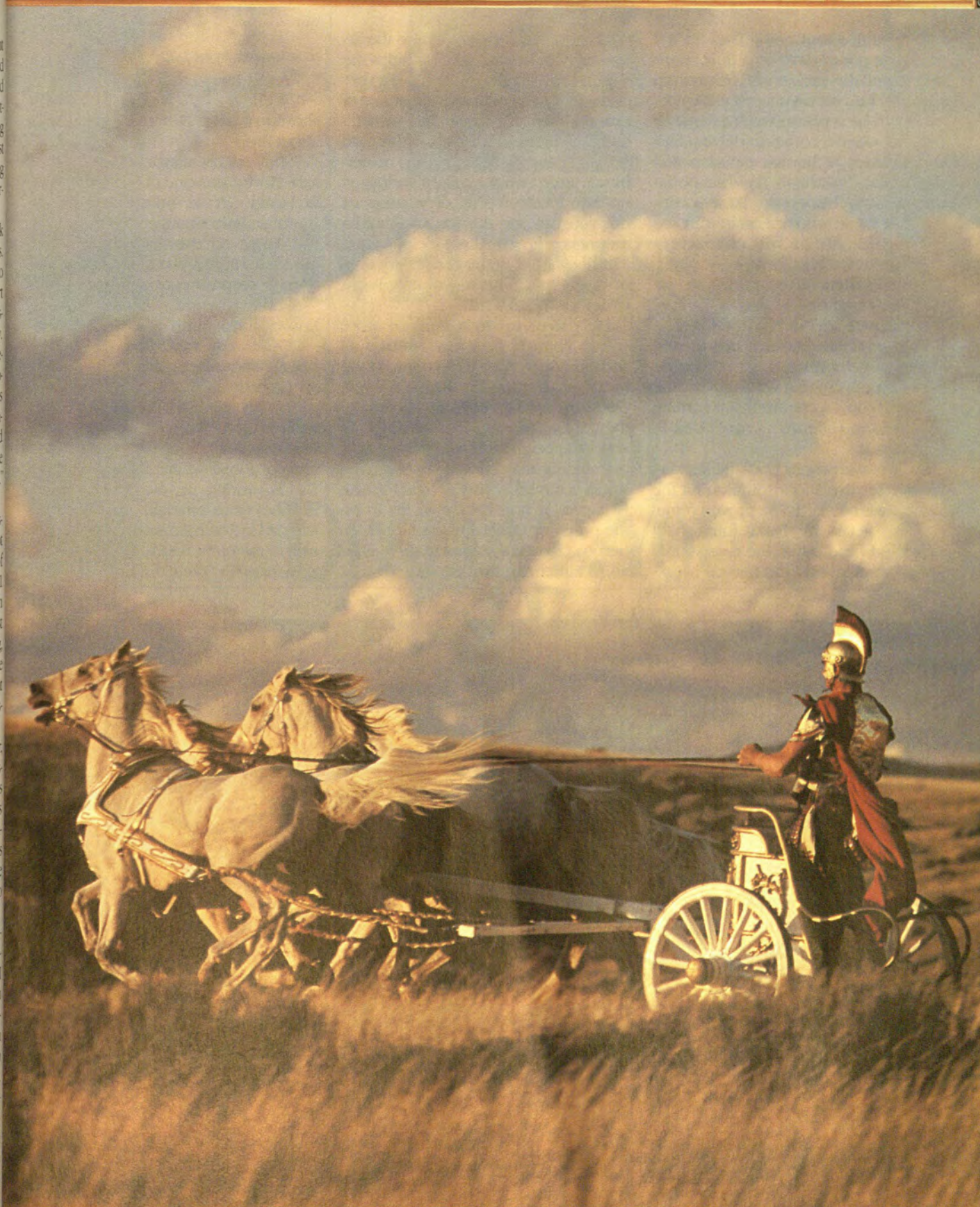
Mercifully, Hillerman didn't listen. He sent his manuscript to the mystery editor of Harper and Row, Joan Kahn. Within 11 days, she had accepted the book, on the condition that he rewrite the last chapter and beef up on the interesting but minor character, Joe Leaphorn. He did. It was published in 1970. And that was the beginning of Hillerman's mysterious career.

Subsequent mysteries came easier in part because Hillerman stopped using outlines. These days he just lets one chapter lead to the next as if he is following a string left by his muse. Villains change mid-story sometimes, as do motivations. The solution to the mystery is often as much a surprise to Hillerman as it is to his readers.

Hillerman supplemented his fledgling writing career by teaching journalism at the University of New Mexico. "I loved teaching," he said. The Vietnam War was raging, students were protesting and the National Guard was on campus. And students were there to learn without worry about grades. Which was good, because in Hillerman's classes A's were rarer than Rolex on the reservation. When students got more interested in grades than in learning, Hillerman retired. That was in 1986. By then he had published nine books of fiction and four nonfiction works.

Hillerman still wants to write his redneck *Catcher in the Rye*. "Every-

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TONY HILLERMAN

time I think about going back to it I think I've got to develop a little more skill to pull this sucker off," he says. No surprise, he's his own worst critic. Occasionally he is pleased with a scene or two. But when it comes to delving into complexities of human emotion and motivation, "invariably I'm disappointed," he says. Readers are far less critical. And those who are astute can see the evolution of his characters throughout his Navajo mystery series. We find in *Skinwalkers* that the old rationalist Leaphorn is deeply in love with his wife and, in *Thief of Time*, he grieves terribly when she dies. Idealist Chee struggles miserably to reconcile his often opposing roles as tribal shaman and cop—a conflict that is coming to a head in Hillerman's new book in progress.

As it is with every book, Hillerman hit chapter five and inspiration hit the road. He is blocked. The proven remedy is to get in his Isuzu four-wheel drive and head out to the reservation. "I've always found I can make a break-

through when I get out where the action takes place," he says. "It helps me a great deal if in my mind I have a very clean, fresh, clear-cut mental picture of exactly where it's happening—whether it's by the mailbox beside the road here or near an old dried up winter-blown aster, or if the culvert is clogged up with tumbleweeds, or whether or not you can see the top of Franklin mountains, how the light looks. A lot of that doesn't get in the book. Very little of it gets in the book. But it makes it easier for me to write."

He drives up to a general store where country boys like himself sit and tell stories. After a few minutes, the locals get over the fact that he has wax on his car and recently soled boots and they set to talking. He learns more about the people this way than he ever did reading anthropology books in the stacks at the University of New Mexico. Belagana or not, Hillerman fits in on the porch or under the big, dry, thunderous clouds of summer. He is, after all, in Hillerman Country. ●

CHEE'S WITCH

(continued from page 35)

"Yes," Chee said.

"Well, s . . .," Wells said. "You shouldn't have. What do you know about him?"

"Showed up maybe three months ago. Moved into one of those U.S. Public Health Service houses over by the Kayenta clinic. Stranger. Keeps to himself. From off the reservation somewhere. I figured you federals put him here to keep him out of sight."

Wells frowned. "How long you known about him?"

"Quite a while," Chee said. He'd known about Begay within a week after his arrival.

"He's a witness," Wells said. "They broke a car theft operation in Los Angeles. Big deal. National connections. One of those where they have hired hands picking up expensive models and they drive 'em right on the ship and off-load in South America. This Begay is one of the hired hands. Nobody much

(continued on page 53)



Dr. Chester L. Karrass

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