

LOUIS L'AMOUR

WESTERN MAGAZINE

SHOWDOWN AT CARSON CITY

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FICTION

PLUS

Tony Hillerman's West

PREMIERE
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Elana Lore
EDITOR

Jean Traina
DESIGN DIRECTOR

Marilyn Roberts
SENIOR PRODUCTION MANAGER

Carole Dixon
PRODUCTION MANAGER

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RENEWAL & BILLING MANAGER,
SUBSCRIPTION SALES

Fred Sabloff
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER
AND ADVERTISING DIRECTOR
212-782-8562

Advertising Representative

FOX ASSOCIATES, INC.
116 W. KINZIE ST.
CHICAGO, IL 60610
312-644-3888

Christoph Haas-Heye
PRESIDENT AND PUBLISHER
DELL MAGAZINES

Richard Sarnoff
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT
BANTAM DOUBLEDAY DELL
PUBLISHING GROUP, INC.

Jack Hoeft
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BY

TONY
HILLERMAN

White House Ruin, in Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, was abandoned about eight hundred years ago by the Anasazi Indians. It was here, twenty-five years ago, that the plot idea jelled for Tony Hillerman's first book.



OUR OWN HOLY LAND

FROM ALBUQUERQUE, THE California-bound Amtrak train detours down the shady bosquet of cottonwoods lining the Rio Grande. It crosses the river at Isleta Pueblo and climbs the long slope we call "the *llano*." It's about then that I move up to the observation car. When the train tops the ridge a scene opens that never fails to move me. From this ridge you look into a land full of spirits.

The last time I looked into America's very own Holy Land from an Amtrak observation car it was late summer—the last days of the thunderstorm season. I sat near three men who had boarded days before, somewhere east of Chicago, and had formed the sort of friendship train travel encourages. When the train reached the top of the ridge and the emptiness of western New Mexico opened before us, their conversation stopped midsentence.

Shiprock rises out of an ocean of prairie grass like a Gothic cathedral built for giants.



"My God!" one said. "Why would anyone live out here?"

Why, indeed?

We looked across hundreds of square miles of dry country—eight inches of rain on a wet year, an infinity of needle grass, grama, snakeweed, fringed sage, and rabbit brush. The land is tan and gray, freckled here and there with the dark green of junipers, streaked and dappled with cloud shadows. Beyond this great bowl of prairie rise the shapes of Noer Butte, Chicken Mountain, and, dim blue with distance, the Zuni range where Spider Grandmother led the Zunis to the Center of the Universe. There are the Cebolitos; Mesa Gigante, where the Lagunas have their villages; and—looming above them all—the Turquoise Mountain of the Navajos. It is an arid landscape, inhospitable, almost empty, with none of the lush green that spells prosperity. It is built far out of human scale, too large for habitation, making man feel tiny, threatened, aware of his fragility and mortality.

Perhaps that is why it is good for me—why I seem to need it, and return at every excuse. As I cross the ridge and see the Turquoise Mountain looming on the horizon, the weight of Albuquerque—of the buzzing telephone, of unanswered mail and unkept promises—falls away. It is my favorite mountain, and the gateway to my favorite places.

One of them is on the mountain itself. We call it Mount Taylor. For the Tewa-speaking Pueblo Indians of the Rio Grande, it is Dark Mountain, where the two Little War Gods sometimes dwell. For the Navajos it is *Tsodzil*, one of the four mountains that mark the corners of *Dineh Bikeyah*—Navajo Country. It was built in its present form in this Navajo "Fifth World" by the spirit called First Man. But it had also existed in the earlier worlds through which the

NAVAJO SHAMANS

COME TO THE TURQUOISE

MOUNTAIN TO COLLECT

MINERALS FOR THEIR

"FOUR MOUNTAINS JISH"

AND HERBS FOR THEIR

MEDICINE BUNDLES.

Navajos had evolved toward humanity, culture, and harmony. First Man built it on a magic blue blanket, then pinned it to the earth with his knife to keep it from floating away. He made it beautiful with turquoise and assigned Blue Flint Girl to live on Mosca Peak, guarded forever by Big Snake, and forever guarding the Navajos from chaos.

I can see the Turquoise Mountain from my Albuquerque home. It rises on the horizon—a ragged indigo line against garish sunsets, snowcapped in winter, wearing a scarf of blowing clouds in the windy spring, forming the base for towering thunderstorms in the summer. When smog fills the Rio Grande Valley, it seems to float above the earth as if First Man's magic knife had slipped. It is only sixty-five miles away, but it reminds me of a different world.

My favorite place on that mountain is easy to reach—a fast drive west on Interstate 40 to Grants, then State Road 547 into the San Mateo Mountains and upward on the forest service road to the

Mosca Peak lookout. Long ago a fire swept through the forest here, leaving a jackstraw jumble of fallen timbers. Aspen and mountain mahogany have grown up through that woodpile now; young fir and spruce are making their comeback; and the meadows opened by the burn are blue and yellow with wild iris, columbine, and lupine. It is one of the places I have memorized. I can visit it by merely closing my eyes.

Navajo shamans come here to collect minerals for their "four mountains jish" and herbs for their medicine bundles. You sometimes see the painted stick-and-feather prayer plumes they leave as offerings for what they have taken. It was here in Navajo mythology that Monster Slayer and Born for Water, his thoughtful twin brother, killed Walking Giant with arrows of lightning. It is here that Father Sky touches his hand to that of Mother Earth.

I like to come on summer afternoons when the Turquoise Mountain is playing its role as mother of the thunderstorms. Last August I sat on a log watching the drifting mist erase the forest around me, recreate it, then hide it again. The rumble and thump of thunder in the surrounding clouds could have been the remembered sound of the epic struggle of Walking Giant and Monster Slayer. Then the storm moved eastward, leaving silence behind. A faint breeze brought in the smell of rain and forest dampness, the sound of a horned lark somewhere out there in the mist, and the sorrowful call of a saw-whet owl. I found myself forgetting the violent odyssey of the Hero Twins and remembering another piece of Navajo mythic poetry. It teaches that to shelter Blue Flint Girl on this peak, First Man built "a house made of morning mist, a house made of dawn." On a day like that it was easy to believe that the holy girl still lives in

such a house, just out of sight behind the fires, keeping her eternal promise to preserve harmony.

This empty, impoverished country west of Albuquerque holds many such places for me. Below the mountain, for example, is the Malpais, some eighty thousand acres of lava badlands produced by eruptions of this old volcano. The Navajos call it *Ye'itsoh Bidil*, or "Monster's Blood," and their origin mythology makes it the congealed black blood of the ogre killed on the mountain. Traditional Navajos tend to avoid the lava, but to the neighboring Acoma Indians it is holy ground and a place where prayer sticks are left to the kachina spirits.

Interstate 40 crosses the north end of the Malpais, making it easy for those of us who enjoy such weirdness to find isolation in a surreal landscape. An old road wanders southwest from the interstate toward the village of Fence Lake. Anyone who likes to be alone can park beside that road, walk out into the lava, and have the planet to himself.

The Malpais was formed by a series of lava flows over eons of time. Some have been worn smooth over the past million years and are colored by layers of lichens. Some were created as recently as five hundred years ago and are still raw and ragged. Water falling here has no place to sink. It collects in potholes and bubbles up in springs where reeds grow and birds nest. The rodents and reptiles attracted by these little water holes take on the camouflage of a lava universe. Kangaroo rats and field mice here are black instead of tan, and lizards are sooty gray—thus less visible to the golden eagles and hawks hunting overhead.

At midsummer the Malpais is indeed "bad country." The high-altitude sun makes the basalt too hot to touch and the rattlesnakes are on the prowl for rodents. But

ON THE SPIRE OF SHIPROCK, MONSTER SLAYER ALMOST MET HIS MATCH.

on winter days, anyone who enjoys offbeat sensations can find them safely amid the lava. The solitude is absolute. A short tramp from the old road takes you to places where you can stare in every direction and see no sign that Earth is inhabited. Add the surrealism of the lava—like an ocean of black ink frozen mid-storm—and one can imagine himself stranded in some lost galaxy.

I have been prowling this empty corner of the Southwest for much of my life—the first twenty years simply because it appealed to me, and the next twenty because I use it as the setting of the novels I write about Navajos. Thus I have collected a variety of places that lift my spirit. Another of these is Shiprock, a Navajo sacred place.

The Navajos call it *Tse' Bit'a'i*—"the Rock with Wings." It's the basaltic core of a volcano, once protected by a great cone of ash. Now, with the cone eroded away, the basalt throat rises out of an ocean of prairie grass like a Gothic cathedral built for giants. Its peak is 7,178 feet above sea level, and while that is lower than the Chuska Mountains just west on the Arizona border, the Chuskas are normal mountains. Shiprock isn't. It soars out of the earth, twenty stories taller from its grassy base than the World Trade Center towers are from the Manhattan pavements.

On the spire of this monolith, Monster Slayer almost met his match. After killing the Winged Monster and persuading the monster's nestlings to become the eagle and the owl, he found there was no way down. Spider Grandmother pitied him, finally, and lowered him to earth. The spire's sheer cliffs also attracted modern climbers until the Navajo Tribal Council declared that this holy place was off-limits to desecrating sportsmen.

I am attracted less by the spire and more by a related oddity. The same volcanism that produced the mountain produced three long cracks in the earth's shell. Through these, melted magma was forced up, like toothpaste, into the layer of ash the volcano had deposited. The same eons that eroded Shiprock's cone exposed these "rays." They extend miles from the central core—incredibly thin black walls. I miss no chance to reassure myself that they're as remarkable as I remember them.

Navajo Route 33, en route to Red Rock and the Lukachukai Mountains, crosses a gap in the most impressive of these rays. At the gap the wall is about two or three feet thick, perhaps twenty feet high. Here and there blocks of basalt have fallen out, leaving unlikely portholes. A track leaves the road in this gap and meanders along the foot of the talus below the wall. I walked down the top of the talus last November. It was twilight on a day when a weather front was bulging southward out of Utah, the sky had its stormy look, and the air smelled of snow. The wind was gusty, now hooting through the wall's ragged windows, now subsiding to a sigh. A sparrow hawk was balanced on the currents above, looking for a careless mouse. The basalt ray undulated southward, uphill and down, like a black and narrow version of the Great Wall of China. At its end the spires of Ship-

rock were black against the sky.

That monolith and that once plastic wall always remind me of the force that cracked the earth there and pushed that molten rock upward. They are thoughts to put the triviality of the human species in perspective.

Other places and other moments stick in my memory.

Bosque del Apache wildlife refuge, for instance, down the Rio Grande from Socorro, with red January dawn outlining the Oscura Mountains. Suddenly a sound, growing rapidly: the awakening of thousands of waterfowl wintering there: snow geese awakening Canada geese, awakening sandhill cranes, awakening the mallards and the teal and the pintails. Then the air filling with geese, rising in a kaleidoscope of shifting formations, soaring high enough to be caught by the slanting sunlight, forming patterns against the gray velvet of the Coyote Hills, turning upriver toward you. In a moment the sky overhead is white with an infinity of geese. You hear nothing but their excited conversations. You look through a crack in time and glimpse how it was before the white man came.

Canyon de Chelly is another place that provokes the imagination into time travel. The canyon is filled with reminders of the people who occupied it for a thousand years and then faded away—leaving behind a wonderful supply of unanswered questions about where they went, and why, and why they never returned. Across the canyon from one of the cliff houses they abandoned, a trail leads down some six hundred feet from the rim to the sandy floor of Chinle Wash. You can wade across the shallow stream there (giving yourself a cheap thrill, if you like, by dabbling in the quicksand for which the place is famous) and reach the site we call White House Ruin. It was aban-

THE LAST LOG USED

IN AN ANASAZI

STRUCTURE WAS CUT

IN THE YEAR 1284.

doned about eight hundred years ago by the people the Navajos named Anasazi (actually, *an-aasa'zi*, or "ancestors of enemy people"). Below it is a little bosque of cottonwoods where I like to loaf.

It was here, twenty-five years ago, that the plot idea jelled for my first book—causing a fictional archaeologist to be trapped deep in just such a canyon and to escape captivity by knowing exactly how cliff dwellers built their houses. It was in this canyon that I first saw an Anasazi pictograph of Kokopela, a flute-playing version of Pan. And it was here one evening that I heard what seemed to be Kokopela's flute. It was faint at first, high notes rising and falling, coming nearer down the canyon and defying any but mythological explanations. Then a goat appeared around the canyon bend and with him, alas, came mundane reality. A flock was following him, many wearing bells. The echo of the cliffs blended the tinkling into a single song.

These pink sandstone cliffs are coated with tough, dark deposits of manganese oxide—the desert varnish that nature seems to have created for artists—and the Anasazis covered a lot of it with their drawings. You see human forms with horns and the feet of birds, their torsos decorated with handprints. You see oddly inhuman shapes holding hands, or linking

arms, or armless. There are snakes, cryptic abstractions, and even a depiction that might explain what happened to these people—figures using lances and throwing sticks in combat with figures using bows, a deadlier weapon, which the Anasazis seem never to have mastered. Kokopela is everywhere, with his humpback and his little round head, in various shapes, forms, and positions—but always playing what looks like a clarinet. The Navajos have added him to their pantheon of spirits, calling him Water Sprinkler and making his hump a sack of seeds, and of troubles.

The Hopis who occupied this canyon later and know the Anasazis as their ancestors also left pictographs, as did the Navajos, who arrived later still. Hopi art is mostly abstract—clan totems and symbolic representations from migration stories. Navajo artists were more pragmatic. At the Standing Cow site there's a life-sized cartoon of a cow. Pale against the dark red stone up the canyon rides a column of men wearing wide-brimmed hats and carrying muskets. This column of Mexican troops came in 1805 and slaughtered scores of Navajos who had taken refuge upcanyon in what is now aptly called Massacre Cave. Kit Carson, with his militia and his Ute allies, rode into the canyon some sixty years later and repeated the slaughter.

It is particularly quiet in the canyon in the winter. Navajo families who summer there have moved back to their homes on Defiance Plateau and the tourist season has ended. The branch canyon (Del Muerto) where the structure called the Tower is built is narrow and the streaked cliffs soar toward a narrow slot of sky. On the sandy floor twilight comes early, but the sun still lights the top of the cliff. Archaeologists say the last log used in an Anasazi struc-

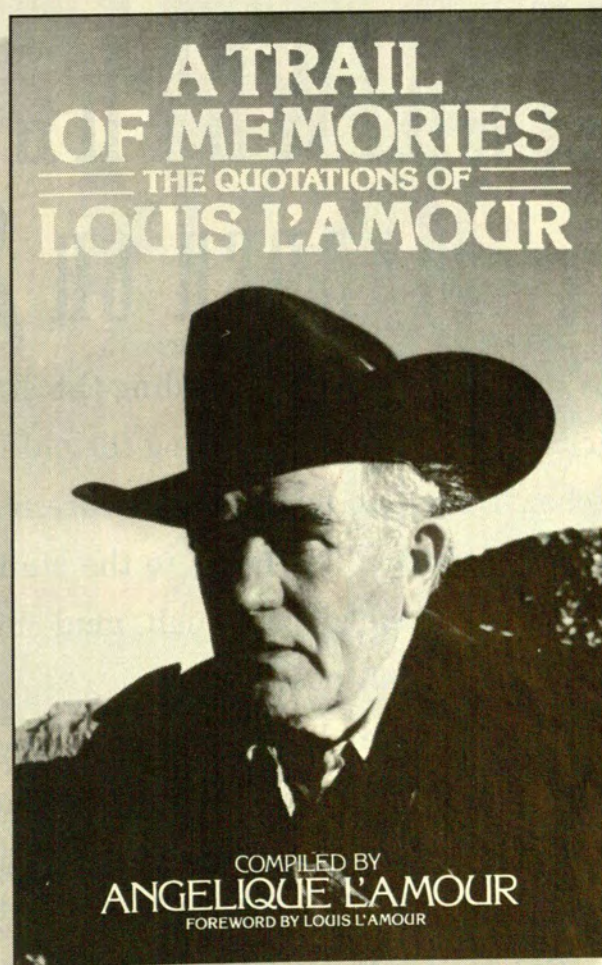
ture was cut in the year 1284 and used in the Tower. They believe it was built by refugees who had abandoned the stone apartments at Mesa Verde. But as soon as they built it, something happened here, too, and civilization ended between these great red cliffs.

What happened? I lean against the cold cliff here in the premature twilight and watch the darkness move up it as the sun sets, thinking about these refugees. These artists, these builders, these religious people, seemed to have this side of the planet mostly to themselves. From what, then, were they fleeing? From what was the Tower built to defend them? What finally ended their civilization?

The Navajos have a story for that, as they do for everything. (Canyon de Chelly, for example, was created when Water Monster released a flood to force Coyote to return his kidnapped baby.) In the Navajo Wind Way legend, the Anasazi were the Blessed Ones. The Holy People had given them all the arts, from pottery and weaving to growing corn and domesticating animals, and taught them the Wind Way ceremonial to cure their illnesses. But the Anasazi became lazy and fell from grace. Illness came and they began misusing the Wind Way. This produced an immense, fiery whirlwind that swept them away and left the cliffs streaked and stained.

That explains why Navajo shamans use the Wind Way only as prescribed—to cure illness of mind and spirit. Perhaps it explains why so few burials are found around the Anasazi ruins. This story, and a thousand stories like it, explain why I come to this country when I feel the need for spirits, and to this canyon when I feel a need for ghosts. ☐

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