

September 1993

USAir

MAGAZINE

Page 60

*David & Tony
There is a
Hillerman article in here
which is very good!
Hope you enjoy
it.
Ladd &
Anne*

Step By Step In Great Britain

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Stepping stones in Great Britain's Lake District. Photo by Joe Viesti/Viesti Associates ©1993.

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How Tony Hillerman Won The West

Any red-blooded mystery fan can easily spot a Tony Hillerman novel. It's the one with the spicy Southwestern tang. Go on, pick it up. You can practically smell the hot peppers and mesquite smoke.

Hillerman is best known for his odd-couple pair of Navajo tribal policemen, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. A Leaphorn-Chee novel doesn't just provide a satisfying story, vivid sense of place, and ruggedly plain prose, it also probes the uneasy relationship between traditional Native American ways and modern-day life on the reservation.

Hillerman's first book, *The Blessing Way*, appeared in 1970. Since then, the Albuquerque, New Mexico-based author has written both fiction and nonfiction books on a number of other topics, but Leaphorn and Chee remain everyone's favorites. The 11th installment of their adventures, *Sacred Clowns*, is due out this month from HarperCollins.

Leaphorn and Chee's desert adventures have been translated into 22 languages, including such improbable tongues as Indonesian, Icelandic, and Czech. Hillerman himself has been showered with honors. In 1973 the Mystery Writers of America gave Hillerman's *Dance Hall of the Dead* their top award, the Edgar Allan Poe Award. In 1991 the organization named him a Grand Master. The final arbiter, the reading public, routinely turns his books into bestsellers.

His efforts to inform the world about Native American culture have not gone unnoticed among the people he portrays. Sometimes the recognition is overt, as when he was named a "Special Friend of the Dineh" by the

Navajo nation. Sometimes it's less tangible; his books are widely used as texts in American Indian schools.

Born in 1925 in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma ("it wasn't even a town, just a crossroads with a store, a cotton gin, seven or eight houses, and a church"), Hillerman is a third-generation German-American "with a mixture of God knows what," he says. As a boy, he attended an American Indian boarding school that also took in farm kids. Most of his neighbors were Potawatomi, Seminole, or Sauk and Fox Indians.

In time, Hillerman became a big bear of a guy with a broad smile, a twang you could cut with a knife, and a deep appreciation of Native American ways. "I grew up with all sorts of

write a "serious" novel, he thought a mystery would give him a better shot at publication. "I wasn't particularly a mystery fan—I never did like stories that are just puzzles. I didn't much care who did it. But I'd been reading Eric Ambler and Raymond Chandler, and I saw that you can do everything with a spy novel or a mystery novel that you can do with anything else."

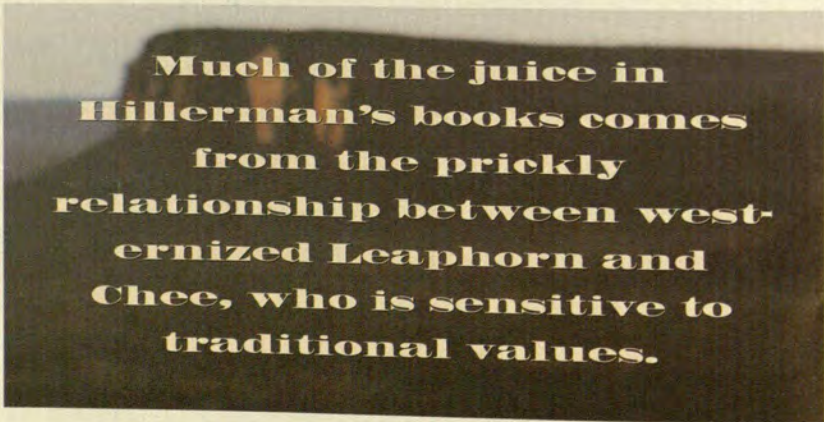
Hillerman also cites another, nearly forgotten influence. "When my first book was published," he says, "a reviewer said it was reminiscent of the Australian writer Arthur Upfield. I looked at that and said to myself 'Aw, yeah! I betcha.' So I went to the library and found some Upfield, and sure enough."

When Hillerman was a boy, he peddled magazines for the Curtis Publishing Company. One Curtis periodical, *The Saturday Evening Post*, occasionally serialized Upfield's books. "I went through all my life with these incredible memories from that serial, of the Australian outback and the aboriginal cul-

ture," he says. "I just loved it."

The Blessing Way, Hillerman's debut, also marked the first appearance of Joe Leaphorn, who was inspired by a real man. "When I was editor of *The New Mexican*," Hillerman says, "the Jicarilla Apaches had a one-man police force. Now, the Jicarillas in their wisdom didn't hire a Jicarilla. They went out and hired a Mescalero, a tough guy who carried a softball bat.

"One day he caught some people stealing gasoline from pipelines. When he tried to arrest them, they shot him in the right shoulder, cutting an artery. He shifted his pistol to his left hand, and, even though he was dying, and did die in a very few minutes, he fired a shot through the pickup truck, which wounded one of



Much of the juice in Hillerman's books comes from the prickly relationship between westernized Leaphorn and Chee, who is sensitive to traditional values.

people," he says, "and I was taught by my dad and my big brother that all people are alike. You judge people by whether they lie to you, whether you can count on them, how they treat their families—and on nothing else."

He received a journalism degree from the University of Oklahoma, and then spent years in the writing trade before finding his niche with Leaphorn and Chee. First came a career as a reporter and editor, including stints with various United Press International bureaus and the executive editorship of the Santa Fe *New Mexican*.

In the late '60s, while teaching journalism at the the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, he was inspired to try his hand at fiction. Although his first impulse was to

the assailants and led to their arrest.

"This stuck in my mind. It impressed me that no one knew a damned thing about this incident, or this guy, or even about tribal police, outside of the immediate area."

Hillerman used that lack of knowledge to his advantage. His canny use of place—of making a particular setting integral to the story—is one reason his books work so well. He thinks that this technique, now common among mystery writers, is one reason why the genre continues to be popular.

"It used to be [with mysteries] that the story took place in Gotham—an imaginary city that was a stereotype of all cities," he says. "There wasn't any real background, and nothing unusual—nothing about how you might put French finish on an antique chair, or about the ways of the bayou in Louisiana, or whatever."

Hillerman says his reliance on an interesting setting also stemmed, at least initially, from a lack of confidence in his own ability to develop plots and characters. "I was a

reporter, so I knew I was good at writing description, but I wasn't sure about the rest. So I thought, I'll pick something where the background is so interesting that, even if the plot's weak, maybe I can sell it."

Another reason for the popularity of mystery novels, Hillerman says, dates as far back as storytelling itself. "The real reason people are so interested in them is simply that mysteries are tales. Was it Aristotle who insisted we have a beginning, a middle, and an end? Mainstream fiction isn't necessarily that way, but mysteries have to be a well-told tale. I think as long as humanity exists, people will want to hear stories."

Leaphorn's counterpart, Jim Chee, was created out of a need for a character who was more attuned to tradi-

tional tribal ways. "One of my books takes place in the Checkerboard, the eastern part of the reservation, where all different kinds of people are living together. I wanted a tribal cop who could look with interest and amazement on the differences between Menonites, Hopis, and so on. But Leaphorn was too old and urbane and cynical—I needed a new, young guy."

Much of the juice in the Hillerman books comes from the prickly relationship between middle-aged Leaphorn, westernized and set in his ways, and young Chee, flexible and sensitive to traditional values. "That's the way it really is," Hillerman says. "People in their 30s and 40s are more likely to be immersed in their culture than guys Leaphorn's age. You had a

on with it," he says cheerfully.

"But, hell, there's plenty of books where they get on with it. I'm not a romance writer, and I like the fact that it moves slowly." Besides, Hillerman notes, Native Americans tend to be demure.

Hillerman is proud that his books, generally speaking, are praised by Native Americans. "In 20-odd years I've had only two people ask me if I wasn't exploiting the Navajos. Shouldn't I leave them alone? What made me think I could write about them, not being one myself?"

He compares such questions to asking a male writer not to portray a woman, or vice versa. "If you believe that there is a genetic difference in the blood that would cause me not to

understand a Navajo, then you are almost by definition a racist. I do not believe that's true. There's a difference in skin tone, but there's no difference behind the skull bone."

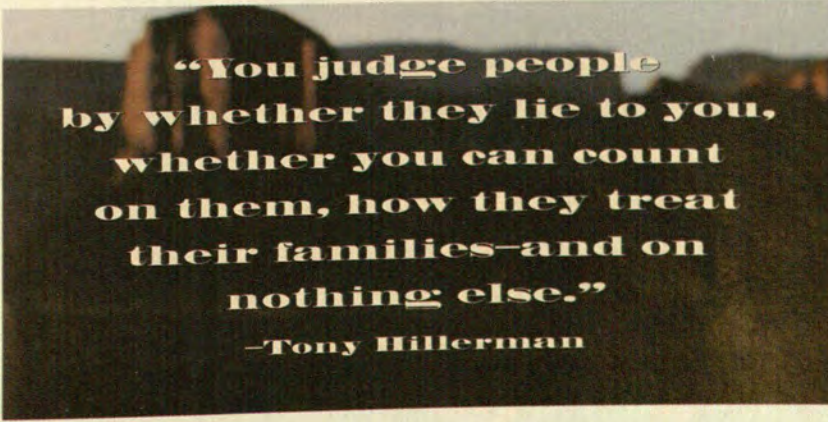
Hillerman works hard to portray American Indians as neither goody-goody nor all evil.

"It's extremely important to me that my books treat them with respect, as fellow human beings, which is exactly what they are. They tend to be treated with a kind of phony, stereotypical superman aura—like they're all mystics and deer slayers and trackers and stoics.

"Bull! They're just like everyone else. They're formed by their culture, just as we all are."

Hillerman thinks there's much more that the world can learn from American Indians—and that they can learn about themselves. "The doggone Indian kid growing up in America—you know what he sees, what he hears. Turn on the TV, and here's two cowboys behind a wagon. Every time they shoot, down goes a redskin.

(Continued on page 113)



"You judge people by whether they lie to you, whether you can count on them, how they treat their families—and on nothing else."

—Tony Hillerman

whole generation of Navajos—the boarding-school generation—who grew up not knowing their language very well.

"Then, in the '60s, there was that whole wave of back-to-the-roots business. The young Hopis and Navajos got into it. They were being bused to school but living at home, so they learned the traditions from their moms and dads."

Leaphorn is widowed and Chee is single, and each has a slowly budding romance in the wings. From book to book, though, their courtships move at glacial speeds. Sex is virtually nonexistent in a Hillerman book.

"I get a lot of impatient letters from readers who want 'em to get

How Tony Hillerman Won The West

(Continued from page 63)

"When the English and Dutch settlements were beginning to grow on the East Coast, the civilizations they were next to were far more civilized, in the real meaning of the word, and certainly more democratic. The Iroquois federation had universal adult suffrage at a time when about 2,000 people in all of England had that right. They knew about crop rotation, organic fertilizing, and irrigation systems that would have boggled the Europeans' minds."

A lifetime fascination with a culture leads to a lot of knowledge. Much of Hillerman's research is empirical—he hangs out with his Native American friends, asks questions, listens carefully. But he's also a scholar, one who spends a lot of time "reading dissertations that would bore a normal human stiff," he says.

As a result, a romp through the Leaphorn and Chee books guarantees the reader a broad-brush education. For more detailed information, Hillerman recommends *The Book of the Navajo* by Raymond Friday Locke, *The Navajos* by Ruth Underhill, or *The Book of the Hopi and Masked Gods: Navaho & Pueblo Ceremonialism* by Frank Waters.

When not writing or studying Native American ways, Hillerman and his wife, Marie, spend time with their six children and 10 grandchildren. He also devotes time to his garden. The Hillerman home on the outskirts of Albuquerque, spare and cool in the traditional Southwestern style inside, is ringed by a wealth of native flora outside.

Hillerman tries to spend a few hours digging in the afternoons, with mornings reserved for tasks such as answering mail. Nighttime is for writing. "I find when I'm really going that I fall into my old newspaper habits," he says. "I'll work until 1 or 2 in the morning when I'm really rolling."

Hillerman's next projects—two much-delayed novels—will provide

a respite from American Indian lore. One is set in Asia in 1975 and concerns an American's reluctant search for his late brother's half-Thai child. The other, Hillerman says with a grin, is "one of those rites-of-passage books that people tend to write. It's about a redneck kid trying to survive in a land-grant college during the Depression—sort of the opposite of what you usually see, about poor rich kids trying to make it in Dartmouth."

Hillerman is not about to abandon the Navajos, however. Another Leaphorn-Chee adventure, he says, is already "bumping around, trying to take shape. You need about five different ideas for a plot. Two or three will finally cling together and make a critical mass."

So what's the most important lesson he's learned from his research? Hillerman takes a long time to answer. "I'm a practicing Catholic, and my faith is important to me," he says. "I've become immensely impressed with the way God spoke to different people, in different environments and different cultures, and inspired them toward a moral code.

"Westerners are burdened by this problem that Genesis gives us, the notion of man as the master, which separates us from nature. But most of the Native American origin stories with which I'm familiar tend to put man in a different role—he's part of the whole, created in unison with other animals and insects and stuff. The relationship is not master and slave, but a kind of harmony.

"I think, when you study this enough, that you eventually learn how the creative god was not content simply to inspire a few people in the valley of the Euphrates. When you set aside the trappings and get down to the nub, people are so much alike." □

Adam Woog reviews crime fiction for The Seattle Times and has written books about inventions and museums of the Pacific Northwest.

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