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New Mexico Business Journal  
**30**  
YEARS  
1976-2006

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# Leaphorn's Blessing

Tony Hillerman's memoir, *Seldom Disappointed* was released last year, his next book comes out in November

BY KATHY LOUISE SCHUIT AND WAYNE ROWAN

At a booth in his favorite coffee shop in Albuquerque's North Valley, Tony Hillerman sits for an interview.

He's searching his memory for a bit of information.

He's been asked how he got started as a writer, and he wants to include this particular bit into his answer. He assists his search with an arched brow until he finds the desired information, confirms its authenticity and relates it to the story.

Clearly, he's enjoying himself, but not half as much as his listeners. He apologizes for being garrulous; we don't care. Tony Hillerman is speaking and he could be conferring a recipe for marinated flank steak to a convention of vegans and it wouldn't matter.

"I grew up with the Indians – they were my friends," he says describing how his affection for Native Americans and outlines of his famous Navajo characters, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, possibly grew from experiences of his childhood.

Born and raised in Oklahoma, Hillerman received his early education from St. Mary's Academy, a boarding school for Indian girls near his home in Sacred Heart. "They let us farm boys in," he says, but we weren't allowed to play with them on the playground. We went to the field next door; it was a pig farm."

As a young man, Hillerman fought in World War II. He first saw Albuquerque while on a 60-day furlough to recover from injuries – broken legs, foot, ankle, facial burns and temporary blindness – incurred when he stepped on a land mine.

"I really loved it (Albuquerque)," he says. "I got arrested for being way overdue." Fortunately, the arresting MP turned out to be an understand-

ing Joe who simply altered the furlough pass from 60 days to 70.

Of course, there was a woman involved in Hillerman's lack of timely reporting back to his command. She was a pretty thing with "real long red hair," and she needed a ride home, he said. The meeting turned into a short term job. Her father needed someone to make deliveries onto the Navajo reservation.

"I was really impressed by the Navajo," he says. "They were curing people, but it was of malice – not injuries. I remembered that."

Shortly, his "extended" furlough turned into a discharge. And, having the rest of his life now in front of him, Hillerman started his journalism career in a small dusty town in Texas called Border. It was the "carbon black" capitol of the U.S., a substance used, oddly enough, to produce ink, among other things.

Hillerman says his memories of the place stop at lawns layered with black soot and a job covering Hutchinson County, which had "every crime described in the Old Testament and the new" and paid \$50 a week.

"We even had an incest case," he adds, demonstrating how his jaw dropped when an officer revealed the details for his notes.

As a journalist, Hillerman moved around. In Oklahoma, he covered a tornado and, later, the state Legislature. Then, in 1952, he came to New Mexico to write for *United Press International* about politics here. Eventually, he became executive editor of *The Santa Fe New Mexican*.

But what he really wanted to do was write fiction, he says. Years earlier, he'd started his first book, *Finding Moon*, which he says is also his favorite, but couldn't find time to finish it.

"I kept wanting to write that *Finding Moon* book. It wouldn't leave me alone," he says.

Despite his strong desire to break into fiction, Hillerman says, "It took forever."

Besides having to learn – and climb and even swing from – book publishing industry ropes, Hillerman's private life had filled up. He married, and Tony and Marie Hillerman "started accumulating kids." As a couple, the Hillerman's are well known in New Mexico, not only for adopting children of their own, but for helping others to do the same. Altogether, they have six children; five of them are adopted.

By the time Hillerman started his 20-year stint as chairman of the Journalism Department at the University of New Mexico – which ended in 1985 with his retirement – he'd given up on ever finishing *Finding Moon*.

"I put it away," he says.

But there was still freelance writing.

"I was always looking for freelance work," he says, adding he'd also tried writing some short stories, "just as the short story market was dying."

Then, he wrote *Blessing Way* and found an agent to take it.

"I waited and waited and waited and waited," he says of the time it took the agent to read it. When, finally, she returned the story to him, she told him to "get rid of all the Indians."

Hillerman, instead, got rid of the agent and found an editor interested in *Blessing Way*. The book was published in 1970.

Next, according to Hillerman, came *Dance Hall of the Dead*. "Probably one of my best books. I did a good job on that one," he says of the book that won him his first awards

for fiction writing.

Now, having been named a "Grand Master" by Mystery Writers of America and a "Friend of the Navajo" by the tribe, Tony Hillerman is much more than a New Mexico icon – in a sense, he, through his stories, belongs to the world. And yet, Hillerman, unassuming even with millions of copies of his 31 books sold, and who can tic off all the titles, is not certain how many are still in print (they all are).

Just like any other admirer of fiction, he has favorite authors of his own: mystery writers John D. MacDonald and Raymond Chandler, and he calls Ernest Hemingway, "my hero – I love the way he writes." Hillerman says he also enjoys the work of Michael McGarrity and Fred Harris.

When asked, Hillerman even offers advice to aspiring writers: 1. "Don't ever rewrite the first chapter until you finish the book," and,

2. "Leave out the parts the reader skips."

The last, he says he borrowed from Thomas Wolfe.

Tony Hillerman is 80 now. He candidly talks about his health – that's not as good as it used to be – and about the frightening brush with lung cancer that not long ago turned him into a nonsmoker. Nevertheless, he keeps writing. His memoir, *Seldom Disappointed*, was published last year. His next Leaphorn book, a story about a 'cursed blanket,' will be his first, he says, for taking on the subject of the Navajo's Long Walk to internment at Bosque Redondo. It should be released in November.

Incidentally, *Finding Moon* was finally published in 1995. It's a testament to the determination of the man who described writing books as "something that occasionally needs to be approached with grim determination." He still insists it's his fa-

vorite, but admits, with a hint of ... something, that his fans, editors and critics don't agree.

As Hillerman rises to leave the North Valley coffee shop, it is to meet with some old war buddies at the VA hospital.

He's spent nearly three hours answering questions. He's been courteous to the waitress, who messed up his order. He's engaged us with his wit – every bit as sharp in person as it is on paper – and he thanked us at the end for making him feel better. We hate to see him go and Hillerman, the great mystery writer, leaves us wondering if tidbits from our fortunate morning with him, or from his trip to the VA or wherever he went from there, might somehow end up as something in Hillerman pages.

"Writers like me are like a bag lady pushing her cart down the alley, looking for anything that might be useful," he says, "and then he's gone." ■

The advertisement features a large, glowing neon sign for "TAOS INN ROOMS DINING Cocktails CURTOS VACANCY" in a stylized, retro font. Below the sign is a photograph of the Taos Inn building at night, illuminated by warm lights. The building has a classic architectural style with a prominent archway. At the bottom of the advertisement, the phone number "1.866.887.3689" and the website "www.taosinn.com" are displayed in a bold, white font.