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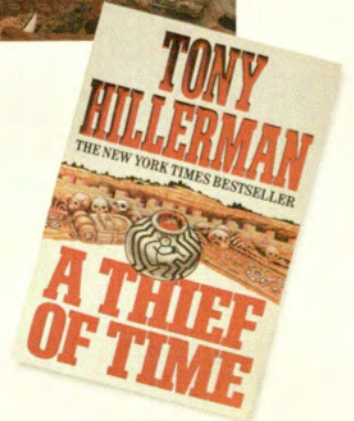
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Cover *Ford Rutbling's garden*,
photo by Charles Mann.

Credits *Clockwise from top left:*
Ford Rutbling's garden, photo by
Charles Mann; Pat and Michael French's
living room, photo by Eric Swanson;
A Thief of Time, by Tony Hillerman.

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prime time for tony hillerman

How an award-winning mystery writer
found his literary muse
in Navajo traditions



DON BARTLETT/LOS ANGELES TIMES/COURTESY ALBUQUERQUE MUSEUM FOUNDATION

BY RICHARD McCORD

Late in 1945, 20-year-old Tony Hillerman, a farm boy from Oklahoma, was convalescing from a World War II battle that broke both his legs, mangled a foot, briefly blinded him, and won him the Silver Star, the Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, and the Purple Heart. When he was able to limp around, he finagled a 60-day furlough from the William Beaumont Army Medical Center in El Paso, Texas, and found a job as a truck driver. One of his deliveries was to Crownpoint, New Mexico, just off the Navajo Indian reservation.

While there, Hillerman was intrigued by a band of Navajo horsemen wearing what seemed to be full religious regalia. He learned that they were headed for an “Enemy Way” ceremony, to welcome home two Navajo U.S. Marines and bring them back into harmony with life. He was told he could attend if he wanted to, and he did. Although Hillerman saw only a part of the multi-day cleansing ritual, he thought at the time, *My God, this would make a good story*. Twenty-five years later, in 1970, that idea became reality when his first novel, *The Blessing Way*, made it into print. Since then, 15 of Hillerman’s “Navajo Mystery” books have been published. His best-selling stories have been adapted into films and television movies, and have drawn an enormous following. Hillerman has won more awards than he can keep track of, and is recognized as one of New Mexico’s most famous and respected authors. But success and fame came slowly.

When he attended the Navajo ceremony, Hillerman was just learning to type, thanks to an Army instructor. After recuperating, he earned his bachelor’s degree in journalism, married, and became a reporter—first in Texas, then in Oklahoma, where he worked for the old United Press news service.

Continued on page 57

Mystery man: Tony Hillerman stands at the foot of Sandia Peak near his home in Albuquerque. He holds a walking stick carved from saguaro cactus and decorated with Kokopelli, the Anasazi symbol of fertility.

THE WAY WE REALLY WERE

Continued from page 33

On his first trip to Santa Fe, in 1948, Hillerman was charmed by the City Different's idiosyncrasies. He remembers sitting by the fireplace at a friend's apartment on Camino sin Nombre when a big feral cat jumped through the window and curled up on the floor beside him; he also recalls watching an elderly sculptor take a pick and shovel and dig up the newly installed concrete curbs on Camino sin Nombre, in an effort to thwart the city's plan to pave the little residential street.

Four years later, back in Santa Fe to interview for the post of United Press New Mexico bureau chief, Hillerman was amazed when the president of the Chamber of Commerce told him, "Yeah, this used to be a good town, but now it's been ruined by growing too fast. People move in and won't move out." He was astonished again when he learned that the screening of an illegal pornographic movie he'd attended—along with the Santa Fe district attorney—was sponsored by the local Jaycees.

Hillerman got the UP job, and kept it from 1952 to 1954. Then he moved to the city's daily newspaper, *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, and was the editor until 1963. But after nine years of six-and-a-half-day workweeks, while also raising a growing family, "I got burned out," Hillerman remembers.

All along, he dreamed of writing books. He was gripped by the idea of a political novel set in the Belgian Congo, a place he had never visited. Then he conceived a mystery about a plot to detonate a nuclear device at Los Alamos. But though he cranked out a chapter or two of each of these, he didn't have time to finish either.

Urged on by his wife, Marie, Hillerman returned to graduate school in English at the University of New Mexico—and again tried fiction. Even with a part-time



Filing suit: Tony Hillerman in the governor's office, circa 1952, when he was working for the United Press news service.

job as assistant to the UNM president, his graduate-student workload was far lighter than his editor's duties had been. And as a marvelous bonus, he had access to the first-rate Center for Southwest Research in UNM's Zimmerman Library.

He never forgot his idea for a book built around the Navajo ceremony he had witnessed years earlier. Hillerman began researching the subject, and typing pages. When he completed his master's degree, in 1966, he immediately joined the UNM journalism faculty—and kept typing.

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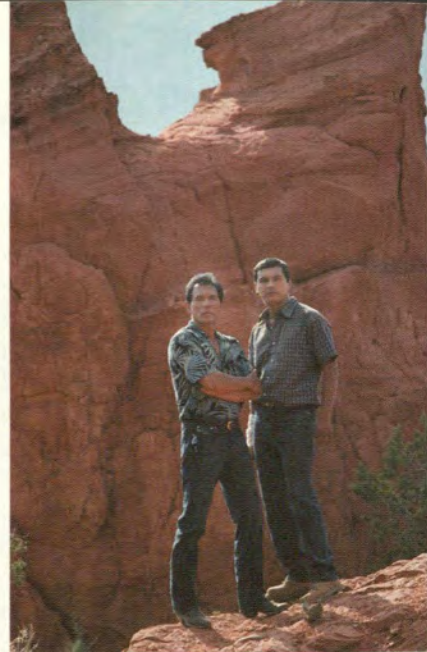
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THE WAY WE REALLY WERE

Eventually, he sent the manuscript of his mystery novel, *The Blessing Way*, to an agent in New York. "It's not a good book," she responded. "Not good at all. I don't want to show it to publishers." She pointed out several serious flaws, which Hillerman acknowledged. "OK, I'll rewrite it," he told her. "Well, if you do," she said, "leave out all that Indian stuff."

Hillerman pondered that advice and decided not to take it. And when he

rewrote *The Blessing Way*, he kept the Navajo theme. This time, he sent it directly to the Harper & Row publishing house, which snapped it up and was sufficiently impressed to sign Hillerman to a three-book contract. But for his second work, he took a different tack. *The Fly on the Wall* was not another Navajo story, but a political mystery about a journalist in Santa Fe. The book was published, but Hillerman's editor made a fateful comment: She stressed



COURTESY NEIL JACOBS FOR WGBH

Rock on! Sleuths Joe Leaphorn (Wes Studi), left, and Jim Chee (Adam Beach) in the PBS adaptation of Hillerman's *Coyote Waits*.

that she much preferred the "Indian stuff." That was the signal he needed.

His next Navajo novel, *Dance Hall of the Dead*, appeared in 1973. A runaway success, the book won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award for best mystery. Hillerman had found his groove.

Today, his two Navajo police heroes, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, are icons to millions of devoted readers. The Mystery Writers of America has named Hillerman a "Grandmaster"; the Oklahoma Hall of Fame has inducted him; the Navajo Nation has given him its Special Friends of the Dineh award; and this May, the Albuquerque Museum is honoring him as a "Notable New Mexican"—only the fourth person so proclaimed.

Still a down-to-earth Oklahoma farm boy in many ways, Hillerman just smiles at his success. "You know that novel I tried to write back in the 1950s, about the Belgian Congo?" he chuckles. "Well, I finally got it published, in 1996, as *Finding Moon*. To make it current, I had to reset it in Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Philippines, but I kept my original hero and my original concept. It didn't sell too well, but it's the book I'm proudest of. It's the closest thing I've written to a serious novel." **SF**

When Santa Fe writer Richard McCord mentioned to some friends in Green Bay, Wisconsin, that he knew Tony Hillerman, one of them asked, "May we touch you?"

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