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MAGAZINE!

Tony Hillerman

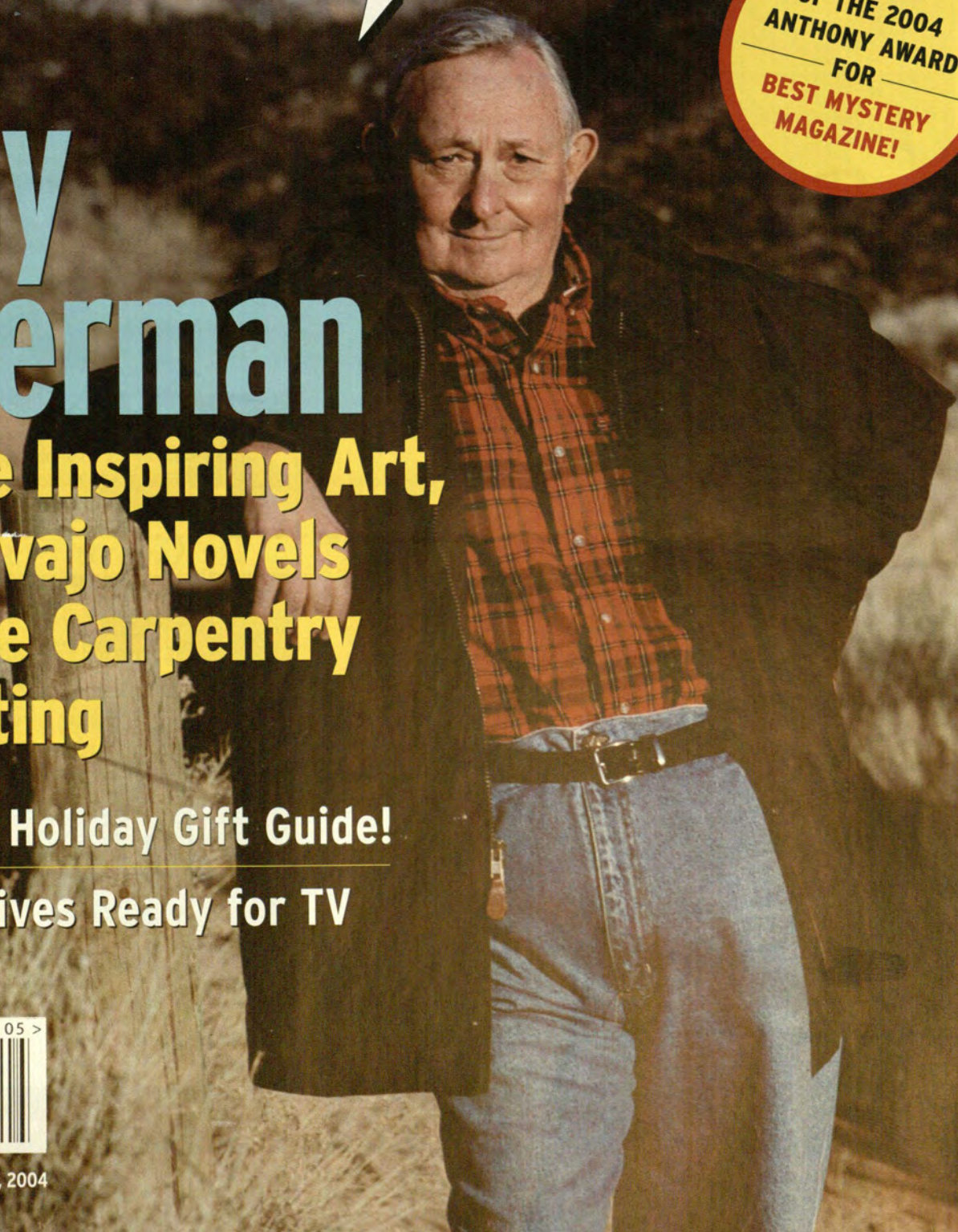
**On Life Inspiring Art,
His Navajo Novels
and the Carpentry
of Writing**

The 2004 Holiday Gift Guide!

10 Detectives Ready for TV



Holiday Issue, Number 87, 2004



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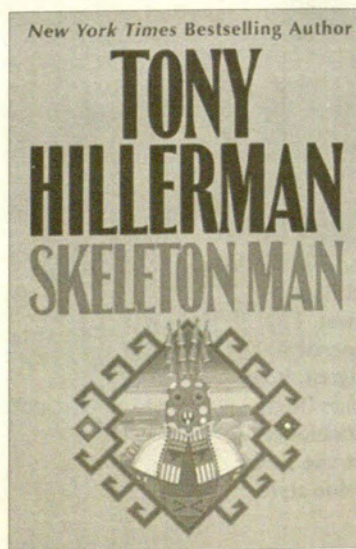
Edward Gorey

The devious legal mind of Sarah Caudwell.

Hillerman Country by Tom Nolan



Credit: Barney Hillerman



Like the weather in New Mexico where he lives and writes, Tony Hillerman can surprise you.

It's no shock of course to learn that this prolific author has a new book out: *Skeleton Man*, the 17th entry in his bestselling series featuring Navajo Tribal Police lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and sergeant Jim Chee. The multi-award-winning Hillerman has been chronicling the exploits of these popular characters since 1970's *The Blessing Way*.

But it might startle some to hear which of his 19 novels, two children's books, and 11 volumes of nonfiction the author himself likes the most.

"*Finding Moon*," says Hillerman, naming one of only two non-series adult novels he's published in 35 years. "There's my best book."

Though reviewers and readers admired that 1995 work, it seems an eccentric choice—until one hears of its author's long and complicated relationship with it, beginning in the 1950s.

"It's really what caused me to start trying to write novels in the first place," says Hillerman, who for seven years was a crime reporter, wire-service bureau manager, and newspaper editor in Texas, Oklahoma (his birthplace), and New Mexico. "I was working for United Press, and all hell was happening in the Belgian Congo; that's way back, the Belgian Congo doesn't exist of course anymore. Stanleyville was in flames, and there were about three different rebel armies and the oil company mercenaries fighting it out; it was total chaos. And I thought, 'Man oh man ... that would be really a hell of a setting for a book'—for somebody who thinks he's good at writing narrative, but doesn't know if he can develop characters or plot or anything, see."

Hillerman began such a book more than once, he says, but: "I didn't know how to do it. And it just sat there. Years passed. Belgian Congo ceases to exist ... Then, I'm watching (on TV) the evacuation of the American embassy, as the Vietnam War was ending—and I'm thinking, 'Hell, there's the Belgian Congo, in a different way. I'm going to go back to that book.'"

By then, Tony Hillerman was a professor of journalism and a department chairman at the University of New Mexico. His second assault on his old plot was thwarted by an inability to get a visa for travel to Vietnam or Cambodia. The novel lay fallow for several more years—until it occurred to Hillerman he could approach his story and its research via the Philippines.

"My plan," he remembers, "was to get inside that famous prison in Manila; I was going to have a couple of the characters in there, you see. But I got to Manila just when the Filipinos had gotten tired of Marcos. The whole city was on a general strike, and the president was fleeing with his wife ... And they weren't letting strangers like me into that prison."

Undaunted (despite discovering the passport he'd brought was expired), Hillerman improvised. "Somebody told me that the real

Navajo tribal cops Lt. Joe Leaphorn (Wes Studi, left) and Jim Chee (Adam Beach) star in the PBS's *Mystery!* dramatizations of Hillerman's novels. So far the PBS series has offered *Skinwalkers* (2002), *Coyote Waits* (2003) and *A Thief of Time* (2004). All three productions are available on DVD and VHS at <<http://www.shoppbs.org/>>.

maximum-security prison was down in the Solomon Islands ... So I flew down there—way the hell down near Guadalcanal—and it was quite a trip. It was quite an experience, and it made the book a hell of a lot better." Some 50 years in the making, *Finding Moon* was at last completed in 1994. "It was important to me," Hillerman says, "and I enjoyed the heck out of writing it, and—I just thought it came out well."

There's another reason *Finding Moon* may be so close to its author's heart. With its backdrop of violent turmoil, the book is among other things a combat story—and as such, it connects to Tony Hillerman's earliest experience with books, as a youngster on an Oklahoma farm.

Asked what he read when he was a kid, Hillerman says: "Oh, I was a war lover. I read *The Conquest of Peru*, I read Civil War books. I read *Beau Geste*, *Beau Sabreur*—those P.C. Wren books about the Foreign Legion. I read about the Boer War. And then—when I'd save money from picking blackberries and we'd go to Shawnee, I would buy *Flying Aces*, and Bill Barnes' *Air Trails*, and I'd read about the air combat in World War One." Hillerman chuckles. "I was afraid World War Two would get over before I could get into it."

It didn't. Hillerman served in the Army Infantry, earning a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and a Purple Heart. He married in 1948, fathered six children, and began a career in journalism. He was 45 years old before his first novel, *The Blessing Way*, was published.

He doesn't regret having waited all that time to write fiction, he says: "Ah, no. I dearly loved being a reporter, being an editor; I loved the newspaper business ... And then I really enjoyed teaching; and when I was teaching, I was still writing magazine stuff, so—no, I don't wish I'd started earlier ... First place, a lot of the stuff in my books is based on what I saw as a police reporter: the kind of people you meet, and what you learn, and the scenes you've seen ... You get a head full of recollections, and some of them fit so well in what you're writing—even though you haven't planned them, exactly, but there they are."

The character of Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn,



Credit: Neil Jacobs for WGBH

*The character of
Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn
was based on a young sheriff
in a Texas town where
Hillerman had been
a police reporter.
"A great big good-looking
guy, he was really smart,
and he was humane
—kind of an ideal cop.
I really liked the guy."
The figure of Sergeant
Jim Chee had a
different sort of genesis.
"I had just been a professor
when I needed Chee,
and I sort of homogenized
a bunch of students that
I had been teaching."*

the novelist says, was based on a young sheriff in a Texas town where Hillerman had been a police reporter. "A great big good-looking guy, and he was really smart, and he was humane—kind of an ideal cop. And I really liked the guy. Years later, when I needed a Navajo cop in *The Blessing Way*, I gave him a lot of the characteristics of this Texas sheriff."

The figure of Sergeant Jim Chee (introduced in 1980's *People of Darkness*) had a different sort of genesis. "I had just been a professor when I needed Chee, and I sort of homogenized a bunch of students that I had been teaching; gave him parts of their personalities, you know."

Chee and the older Leaphorn are separated by a generation. Understandably, it's Leaphorn their creator identifies with most: "Leaphorn thinks more like I do. Somebody asks him if he's playing golf now he's retired, and he says, 'No, I tried it once—got the ball in all nine holes, and I didn't see any reason to do it again.' Which," he says with a chuckle, "is exactly my experience."

In one crucial way, though, Hillerman and Leaphorn differ. The methodical lieutenant keeps track of the progress of his investigations by means of charts and index cards; his creator takes a more relaxed approach. Apart from a large AAA map of

*"You'd like
to think the muse
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and it's just
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but hell, you're just
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putting it together."*

Indian Country, Hillerman says, he consults no outlines when writing a book: "I just hope for the best. And then I go back and fix it, see, when I get something wrong. Or, most of it I fix."

This practical approach towards the creative act was also implanted in Hillerman early on, he says. "When I first decided that I was really going to get serious about trying to write a novel, I visited the University of Georgia and got the reference librarian to let me go through the unedited manuscripts of John Steinbeck; and boy, did I learn a lot from that. I mean, he's a hell of a writer—and the amount of crossing out he did! For example, in *The Wayward Bus*: he had this long, long description written of that bus, and I think he decided, 'This is too damn much bus description'—and he crossed out nearly all of it. Lot of parts like that, where he took out modifiers, changed the pace, modified what a character was saying. You know, you could really see the craftsmanship in his work. And there's a lot of that in any kind of writing. You'd like to think the muse is with you, you're a genius, and it's just flowing out—but hell, you're just a carpenter, putting it together."

Such a practical and unpretentious approach to fiction-writing seems consistent with everything else about the life and ca-

KILROY WAS THERE

A GI's War in Photographs



Photos from the collection of Frank Kessler

TONY HILLERMAN



"War As They Endured It"

"When I saw Frank Kessler's photographs I was struck by how different they were from the movie-camera views I see on television. No public relations pictures here, intended to glorify battle and rally support. These were up-close snapshots of the dirty, damp, and disheveled men in the rifle companies and tank units. It was the war as they endured it, as they struggled through it from the beaches of France to the streets of Berlin until they finally won it.

"With his camera Kessler was out there on the killing fields alongside the rest of us.... Kessler had a remarkable talent for making significant the ordinary images of war. With a snapshot of a U.S. Army medic lighting a cigarette for a bloody German soldier, he tells us how opposing troops came to see one another. . . He shows us soldiers sitting on the muddy bank of a little stream trying to take a bath. He shows us Sherman tanks burning, young men dying, young men dead. Like no other photographs I've seen, Kessler's capture the ugliness, wreckage, cold, and misery of war."

—Tony Hillerman, from the preface to *Kilroy Was There: A GI's War in Photographs*. Photos from the collection of Frank Kessler, by Tony Hillerman. Kent State University Press, 2004, \$25.00. ISBN 0-87338-807-0. Hillerman also wrote the entire text of this stunning book.—ed.

In WWII, Hillerman served as a mortar gunner in the weapons platoon of C Company, 410th Infantry. He was awarded a unit citation Bronze Star, a Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, a Silver Star, and a Purple Heart. Here is a photo of Hillerman, center, with his company. Note the grenade hanging from his collar.

reer of this low-key MWA Grand Master who has stayed with the same publisher for 35 years, and hasn't let his habits or work regimen be changed by success—not even by the filming for PBS-TV of three of his Leaphorn-Chee books, with two more maybe to come.

"I still keep a pretty low profile," says Hillerman. "The worst thing in the world is to be a damn celebrity! I mean—honestly ... Probably would affect your ego, too."

So the author stays away from movie sets and sticks to his writing; even as *Skeleton Man* is being published, he's at work on another Leaphorn (and probably Chee) adventure.

But every once in a while, Tony Hillerman gets a surprise: an indication of how the daily work he does at home in Albuquerque can reach into and affect a larger world.

"Of course I get a lot of letters," he says. "The most interesting one I've gotten recently was from a dad in Colorado, who wrote me about his son, a tech sergeant in an intelligence company with I think it's an engineering battalion, in Iraq. He was a driver for this intelligence colonel; and he'd been reading Leaphorn stories, intrigued by the way Leaphorn used maps. So he got his dad to send him all these different colored pencils, see. And he got the map of their area, their green zone they were in; and he started marking all the incidents where they had a car bombing: if it was a certain kind of car,



Credit: Barney Hillerman

The Book That Changed My Life

by Tony Hillerman

I'd say that the book that had the most impact on my life was one of Arthur Upfield's mystery novels set in the vast empty outback country of Australia—probably *The Will of the Tribe*, but possibly *The Pointed Bone*, or *Death of a Lake*. I'm not sure because I'm going back to about 1938, and I have since read them all.

The best of Upfield's novels featured an Australian police inspector named Napoleon Bonaparte, who was a half-English and half-Australian aborigine and whose best plots were heavily involved with the "abo" religion and culture and the vast Outback landscape. They fascinated me as a teenager. When the first of my Navajo Tribal Police books was published a *Boston Globe* reviewer compared it to an Upfield book. I'd long since forgotten the source of the images of Australia and its original people that filled my memory but I went to the library, and there they were in Upfield's dusty books.

From the website of The National Book Foundation, a non-profit organization that administers the National Book Awards. www.nationalbook.org

or the distances, and all that stuff, just like Leaphorn does. And the company commander, I think it was, asked him what he was doing. Then the commander said, 'Hell, that's a good idea.' Damned if they didn't adopt this system. And they gave this young tech sergeant a Bronze Star, for enterprise

beyond the line of duty." ✦

Tom Nolan is the author of Ross Macdonald: A Biography and editor of the just published The Couple Next Door: Collected Short Mysteries by Margaret Millar (Crippen & Landru).

A Tony Hillerman Reading List

THE NAVAJO MYSTERIES

The Blessing Way, 1970	Coyote Waits, 1990
Dance Hall of the Dead, 1973	Sacred Clowns, 1993
Listening Woman, 1978	Finding Moon, 1995
People of Darkness, 1980	Fallen Man, 1996
The Dark Wind, 1982	First Eagle, 1998
The Ghostway, 1985	Hunting Badger, 1999
Skinwalkers, 1987	Wailing Wind, 2002
A Thief of Time, 1988	Sinister Pig, 2003
Talking God, 1989	Skeleton Man, 2004

OTHER NOVELS

The Fly on the Wall, 1971
Finding Moon, 1995

SELECTED NONFICTION

The Great Taos Bank Robbery and Other Indian Country Affairs, 1973; 1997

The Best of the West: An Anthology of Classic Writing from the American West, edited by Tony Hillerman, 1991

Talking Mysteries: A Conversation with Tony Hillerman, by Ernie Bulow, 1991

Seldom Disappointed: A Memoir, 2001

Kilroy Was There: A GI's War in Photographs from the Collection of Frank Kessler by Tony Hillerman, 2004