

the **Writer**

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the Writer

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This month at writermag.com

- Read our online columnists: Marla Miller of the Santa Barbara Writers Conference in *The Early Years*; Brandi Reissenweber of the Gotham Writers’ Workshop in *Writing Q&A*; and poet Kay Day in *Poetry Beat*. In **Web Only**.
- Meet our editors: Check for future conference visits in **Announcements**.

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Cover photo of Tony Hillerman
by Kelly Campbell

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Building without blueprints

A bestselling crime novelist offers an argument for writing without an outline

By Tony Hillerman

IN 37 YEARS of writing, I have accumulated two bits of wisdom that may be worth passing along.

First, I no longer waste two months perfecting that first chapter before getting on with the book. No matter how carefully you have the project planned, first chapters tend to demand rewriting. Things happen. New ideas suggest themselves, new possibilities intrude. Slow to catch on, I collected a manila folder full of perfect, polished, exactly right, pear-shaped first chapters before I learned this lesson. Their only flaw is that they don't fit the book I finally wrote. Thus Hillerman's First Law: Never polish the first chapter until the last chapter is written.

The second law takes longer to explain. When I defend it, I'm like the fellow with his right arm amputated arguing in favor of left-handed bowling. However, here it is: Some people, sometimes, can write a mystery novel without an outline. Or, put more honestly: If you lack the patience (or brains) to outline the plot, maybe you can grope your way through it anyway, and sometimes it's for the best.

I was in the third chapter of a book entitled *Listening Woman* when this truth dawned. Here's how it happened:

I had tried to outline three previous mystery novels. Failing, and feeling guilt-ridden and inadequate, I finally finished each of them by trying to out-

line a chapter or two ahead as I wrote. I had tried for weeks to blueprint this fourth book, sketching my way through about six chapters. At that point, things became impossibly hazy. So I decided to write the section I had blueprinted. Maybe then I could see my way through the rest of it.

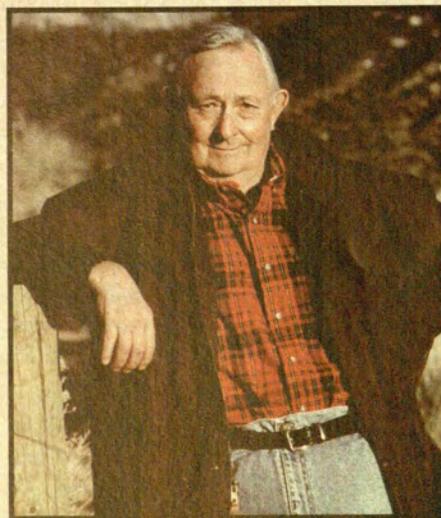
I wrote the first chapter exactly as planned, an elaborate look at the villain outsmarting a team of FBI agents on a rainy night in Washington, D.C. I still feel that this chapter may be the best 5,000 words I've ever written. By the time I had finished it, I had a much better feeling for this key character, and for the plot in which he was involved. Unfortunately, this allowed me to see that I was starting the book too early in the chronology of the story I was telling. So this great first chapter went into the manila folder (to be cannibalized later for flashback material).

Then I planned a new opening. This one takes place now on the Navajo Reservation at the hogan of an elderly and ailing Navajo widower named Tso.

It is mostly a dialogue between him and a shaman he has summoned to determine the cause of his illness. The chapter was intended to establish time, mood and the extreme isolation of the area of the Navajo Reservation where the novel takes place. It would give the reader a look at Tso, who will be the murder victim, and introduce the shaman, who would be a fairly important character. Finally, the dialogue would provide background information and—in its discussion of Navajo taboos violated by Tso—provide clues meaningless to the FBI but significant to my Navajo Sherlock Holmes. Again, all went well, but as I wrote it I could sense a flaw.

It was dull. In fact, it was *awfully dull*.

I had planned to have the second chapter take place a month later. In the interim, Tso has been murdered offstage, and the killing is an old, unsolved homicide. Why not, I wondered, have the murder take place during the opening scene? Because then either a) the shaman would see it, tell the cops, and my novel becomes a short



Kelly Campbell

Tony Hillerman lives in Albuquerque, N.M., and wrote true stories of the Southwest in *The Great Taos Bank Robbery*.

story; or b) the murderer would zap the shaman, too, messing up my plot.

At this stage, a writer who specializes in Navajos and has accumulated a headful of Navajo information searches the memory banks for help. Navajos have a terribly high rate of glaucoma and resulting blindness. Why not a blind old woman shaman? Then how does she get to the isolated Tso hogan? Create a niece, an intern-shaman who drives the old lady around. The niece gets killed, and now you have a double murder done while the blind woman is away at a quiet place having her trance. You also have an opportunity to close the chapter with a dandy little nondull scene in which the blind woman, calling angrily for her newly deceased niece, taps her cane across the scene of carnage. The outline is bent but still recognizable.

Early in Chapter 2, another bend. The revised plan still calls for introducing my protagonist, Navajo Police Lt. Joe Leaphorn, and the villain. Joe stops Gruesome George for speeding, whereupon G.G. tries to run over Joe, roars away, abandons his car and eludes pursuit. Two paragraphs into this chapter, it became apparent that Joe needed someone in the patrol car with him to convert the draggy internal monologue I was writing into snappy dialogue. So I invent a young sheep thief, handcuff him securely, and stick him in the front seat. He turns out to be wittier than I had expected, which distorts things a bit, but nothing serious goes wrong. Not yet. Leaphorn stops the speeder and is walking toward the speeder's car. As many writers do, I imagine myself into scenes—seeing, hearing, smelling everything I am describing.

What does Leaphorn see? His patrol car emergency light flashing red reflections off the speeder's windshield. Through the windshield, he sees the gold-rimmed glasses I'll use as a label for Gruesome George until we get him identified. What else? My imagina-

tion turns whimsical. Why not put in another pair of eyes? Might need another character later. Why not put them in an unorthodox place—peering out of the back seat of the sedan? But why would anyone be sitting in the back? Make it a dog. In a crate. So the dog goes in. I can always take him out.

Still, we seem to have only a minor deflection from the unfinished, modified version of the partial outline. But a page or two later, in Chapter 3, it became obvious that this unplanned, unoutlined dog was going to be important. I could see how this ugly animal could give the villain a previous life and the sort of character I had to hang on him. More important, I could begin to see that Dog (already evolved into a trained attack dog) could be used to build tension in the story. As I thought about the dog, I began to see how my unblueprinted sheep thief would become the way to another plot problem.

Since that third chapter of my fourth mystery novel, I have honestly faced the reality. For me, working up a detailed outline simply isn't a good idea. I have gradually learned that this sort of creative thinking happens for me only when I am at very close quarters with what I am writing—only when I am in the scene, in the mind of the viewpoint character, experiencing the chapter and sharing the thinking of the people in it. From the abstract distance of an outline, with the characters no more than names, nothing seems real to me. I can get a novel written to my satisfaction only by using a much freer form and having faith that—given a few simple ingredients—my imagination will come up with the necessary answers.

Those ingredients, not in any order of importance:

- A setting with which I am intimately familiar. Although I have been nosing around the Navajo Reservation and its borderlands for more than 30 years, I still revisit the landscape I am using before I start a new book—and often revisit it again while I am writing it. And then I work with a detailed, large-scale map beside my word processor.
- A general idea of the nature of the mystery that needs to be solved, and a good idea of the motive for the crime, or crimes.

- A theme. For example, *The Dark Wind* exposes my Navajo cop to a crime motivated by revenge—to which Navajos attach no value and find difficult to understand.
- One or two important characters, in addition to the policeman/protagonist. However, even these characters tend to be foggy at first. In *Dance Hall of the Dead*, the young anthropology

graduate student I had earmarked as the murderer turned out to be too much of a weakling for the job. Another fellow took on the role.

When I finish this, I will return to Chapter 8 of the present “work in progress.” My policeman has just gone to the Farmington jail, where I had intended to have him interview a suspect. Instead, he has met the suspect's attorney—a hard-nosed young woman who, as the dialogue progressed, outsmarted my cop at every turn. This woman did not exist in my nebulous plans for this book and has no role. But I have a strong feeling that she will assume one, and that it will be a better book because of her.

That's a good argument against outlines. Without one, I can hardly wait to see how this book will turn out.

Tony Hillerman

Tony Hillerman is past president of Mystery Writers of America and has received its Edgar and Grand Master awards. He is the author of more than 20 mysteries featuring Navajo detectives Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn; his latest book in the series is *The Shape Shifter*.

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“Creative thinking happens for me ... only when I am in the scene ... experiencing the chapter and sharing the thinking of the people in it.”