

NAVAJO MYSTERIES AND CULTURE

THE FOUR CORNERS WITH TONY HILLERMAN

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Abstract

Read the Jim Chee/Joe Leaphorn mystery novels of Tony Hillerman, augmented by the recent additions by his daughter Anne, and study the Indian myths and cultural concepts they embody. The land is sacred to the Navajo, as reflected in their religion, arts, and weaving. While enjoying Mr. Hillerman's descriptions of southwestern landscapes and its people, review Navajo mythology with its beautiful descriptions of the cycle of life, the formation of the world, and the special reverence for land. Consider the relation of the Navajo to the Hopi and Pueblo peoples of the Anasazi migration. The course will provide an appreciation of Navajo concepts including "hozho," going in beauty and harmony with nature, and its reversal of witchcraft ("skinwalkers"). It will delve into the basis of tribal sovereignty and existing treaties to better understand the politics of cultural preservation. The course will also consider current Navajo issues, including the control and exploitation of mineral and energy resources and their impact on the Navajo Nation. Mr. Hillerman generally weaves current issues of importance to Indian Country into his work. This is a two-semester course in which the student should expect to read about 7 first class mystery novels each semester.

Course Operation

While reading and enjoying the Tony Hillerman mysteries, we will discuss the examples of Navajo religion, spirituality and culture portrayed in the stories. As the opportunity arises, we'll consider the treaties, U.S. policies, social experiments, and laws that have shaped our relations with the Navajo Nation (as well as those with all 562 federally recognized U.S. Indian tribes). I will integrate a discussion of the novels and their direct themes and descriptions, with sessions reviewing the concepts and issues to establish a context for the novels.

Course Objectives

First and foremost to read and enjoy some excellent stories set in an exotic location (for an Easterner). Then to enjoy poetic descriptions of the land to appreciate why the Navajo, as do all Native Americans, love and revere the land. Using the Navajo experience we'll learn about Native American culture, religion, and politics including their role in the development of the United States. Finally we'll (hopefully) develop an understanding of the complexity and sophistication of Navajo culture and politics to appreciate how our indigenous cultures have survived 500 years of contact with Europeans in the contest for the land and its resources.

Novels to be Read

The following Tony Hillerman novels will be used in the first semester of the course:

- The Blessing Way (1970). Witchcraft and the origin of evil as a reversal of the Navajo way.

- Coyote Waits (1990). The Navajo creation myths. The “coyote” as a metaphor for the unpredictable in life.
- Listening Woman (1978). Navajo ceremonies as a cure for sickness. Legal jurisdiction on the Reservation.
- People of Darkness (1980). Evil in oil and uranium country on the “checkerboard” reservation. The Crownpoint Navajo rug auction.
- Dance Hall of the Dead (1973). Archeological envy and jealousy on the Zuni Reservation gives Mr. Hillerman the opportunity to compare the Zuni and Navajo cultures.
- Thief of Time (1988). Violation of the Antiquities Act of 1906 and the murderous greed of “pot hunting.” Tony Hillerman’s “break out” novel.
- Talking God (1989). Political intrigue between Washington and Indian Country, and its impact on cultural preservation. The role of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and subsequent battles for research materials.

Suggested Additional Reading for background and Interest

- Dine bahane, Paul G. Zolbrod (1984). The Navajo origin myths as recorded and translated by a dedicated scholar of the Navajo culture and language. The most authoritative source of written information on the Navajo myths.
- Hosteen Klah, Franc Johnson Newcomb (1964). The biography of a Navajo medicine man by a woman stationed at a trading post, who became one of the most insightful writers on Navajo history and culture.
- Desert Wife, Hilda Faunce (1928). The stories of a woman who shared the operation of a remote trading post on the Navajo Reservation prior to W.W.I.
- Talking to the Ground, Douglas Preston (1995). The path taken by Monster Slayer and his brother Born for Water in their adventure to rid the 5th world of the monsters is “retraced” by a modern family. Excellent stories of Navajoland (Dine Bikayh) and its beautiful landscapes.

Please attempt to access the following Native American websites on a continuing basis. They provide a good review of current issues, and frequently have good material on historical and cultural items:

- www.indianz.com
- www.indiancountry.com
- www.navajotimes.com
- www.narf.org
- www.pechanga.net

Classes on Tuesday from 10:30-11:45am

<u>Class Date</u>	<u>Subject/Topics</u>
Week 1	Overview-Opening remarks. Course description and operation. Tony Hillerman and his craft. "The Blessing Way" and the theme of witchcraft/evil as the opposite of hozro (going in beauty).
Week 2	Discuss "The Blessing Way" and witchcraft as derived from the Story of the heron diving back down into the flooding Fourth World (pp 97 and 277 Harper paperback).
Week 3	Navajo Origin Story, Dine Bahane (Emergence) and Dine Bikeyah, the Four Sacred Mountains. Parallels to the "Monomyth" analysis of Joseph Campbell from "The Hero with a Thousand Faces." The Navajo oral tradition and story telling art.
Week 4	"Coyote Waits"- Coyote as a metaphor for the unpredictable in life. The "trickster" and his ambiguous behavior. Coyote stories, and the friendship of people and animals.
Week 5	"Listening Woman"- Navajo images and ceremonies to establish harmony and cure illness through acceptance of fate. The Yeibeichi ceremony, and its images. Application of the Monomyth analysis.
Week 6	"People of Darkness"- Evil over uranium on the "checkerboard" reservation. Competition among police groups regarding criminal investigations. The Crownpoint Navajo rug auction, with samples. Plan on bringing your favorite Navajo weaving.
Week 7	Navajo tribal sovereignty, and legal jurisdiction on the reservation. Control of behavior and torts as a measure of independence. Tribal sovereignty as the key to preservation of Indian cultures.
Week 8	Natural resource leasing under the trust responsibility. Navajo Experience with Peabody Coal and the pending court case regarding royalty payments. Tony Hillerman's description of the land, mirroring the Navajo love of land and place. Selections from "The Blessingway," "People of Darkness," and "Dine bahane."
Week 9	"Dance Hall of the Dead" – Contrasts of the Zuni and Navajo cultures and myths. Especially the mutual respect for the hozho/Appollian middle of the road approach to life, society, and self. Tony Hillerman's favorite book.

- Week 10 “Thief of Time”- Tony Hillerman’s masterpiece of suspense and Anasazi culture, archeology, and art describing the Grand Gulch region of Utah.
- Week 11 The Anasazi and modern day Pueblo people and life. Continue the discussion of “Thief of Time.”
- Week 12 “Talking God” – Joe Leaphorn follows the trail of a terrorist group from Gallup to the Smithsonian and into the politics of cultural preservation.
- Week 13 Summary of the course. A sharing of impressions of Tony Hillerman’s novels and their characterization of the Southwest and Native American cultures. Favorite books, passages, and comments offered by class members.

CATALOG ABSTRACT

NAVAJO MYSTERIES AND CULTURE

Read the Jim Chee/Joe Leaphorn mystery novels of Tony Hillerman, and study the Indian myths and cultural concepts they incorporate. Enjoy Mr. Hillerman’s descriptions of western landscape and its effect on people. Consider issues regarding the control and exploitation of Native Americans and their resources.

Bruce Morrissey © 2016
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Please note- Changes in the class schedule and/or topic may be made to accommodate guest speaker availability or unforeseen responsibilities.