

# Passing of the torch

## *Celebrated crime novelist dies*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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by Jim Napier



**W**hen author Tony Hillerman's death was announced on Monday, many people must have said, "Tony who?" for he was a paradox. Not exactly a household name, Hillerman's work was nonetheless known to generations of mystery readers around the world and has been the subject of numerous books, films and videos. His own novels have sold in the millions and have been translated into dozens of languages. Compared a decade ago by the book editor of the *Christian Science Monitor* to such seminal figures as Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, he remained

throughout his life accessible to his colleagues and to the public at large. A plain-spoken man, Hillerman's writing found favour among some of the most educated and sophisticated figures of our day. And although he became through his writing one of the wealthiest men in New Mexico, Hillerman continued to live simply. As one of his lifelong friends observed, "*When lightning struck and he made millions, he was still buying \$12 shoes and \$9 fishing rods. He hasn't changed one bit,*" Simply put, Tony Hillerman lived life on his own terms.

Born in rural Oklahoma in 1925, Hillerman attended an Indian boarding school and went on to study journalism at the University of Oklahoma, where he met and married his wife Marie. He served in the infantry during the latter half of WW II, where he received both the Silver and Bronze Stars for heroism in action, and, after being severely wounded, the Purple Heart. Following the war Hillerman returned to the Southwest where he came to value the Navajo goal of being in harmony with one's surroundings. By turns a police reporter, political writer and editor, Hillerman joined the journalism faculty at the University of New Mexico, where he began writing fiction in the late '60s.

In 1970 his first novel, *The Blessing Way* was published. Thankfully, he had ignored one agent who advised him that the detective elements were fine, but he should “get rid of the Indian stuff”. It became the first in a series of 18 novels set on native reservations in the Four Corners region of the American Southwest, and featuring police investigators Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police.

In 1986 Hillerman published what is generally regarded as his breakthrough novel, *Skinwalkers*. By the time of his death he had published seventeen more novels featuring the duo. His books were so highly regarded among the native peoples that they were used in Navajo schools to teach young native Americans about their culture. In 1989 Hillerman explained his decision to focus on Navajo peoples: “*They’re the very bottom of the pecking order among Indian tribes out here,*” Hillerman told Newsweek magazine. “*They’re the country bumpkins. And I’ve always identified with that.*” Hillerman also wrote a number of highly-regarded non-fiction works, all dealing with native culture and the American Southwest.

An Edgar award winner and former President of the Mystery Writers of America, in 1991 Hillerman was named a Grandmaster of the MWA in recognition of his lifelong contributions to the field of mystery writing. His other honors include the Center for the American Indian's Ambassador Award, the Silver Spur Award for the best novel set in the West, the Navajo Tribe's Special Friend Award, the National Media Award from the American Anthropological Association, the Nero Wolfe Award, and the *Grand Prix de Littérature Policière*. As well, *Skinwalkers*, *A Thief of Time* and *Coyote*

*Waits* were subsequently filmed as television movies by Robert Redford and featured Native American actors.

Tony Hillerman's contribution to the genre did not end with his own novels. A few years ago, as a professor at the University of New Mexico, he began bringing together prizewinning authors with aspiring writers for the annual Tony Hillerman Writers Conference, a series of workshops designed to promote quality crimewriting about the American Southwest. A feature of the conference is the Tony Hillerman Mystery Short Story Contest, which awards a cash prize and publication for new authors.

### *A distinctively American voice*

Evocative and well-paced, with understated, spare dialogue that reflects the characters and their culture, Hillerman's novels read effortlessly – a sure sign of a talented writer. He captures perfectly the cadence of Navajo speech, with its short sentences and simple, straight-to-the-point dialogue. Set in the primal setting of the American Southwest, his characters inhabit a world of dusty roads and trailer life, native schools and vanishing ways, vintage pickups with gun racks in their rear windows, and a dwindling people trying to hold on to their values and traditions against the inroads of the white man's world.

Hillerman's books provide a very satisfying read, not only for their depiction of a unique setting and a vanishing way of life, but as exception-ally literate and well-crafted tales. I especially recommend *Shapeshifters*, *The Thief of Time* (Hillerman's own favourite), and *Coyote Waits*, which some critics consider his finest work. Readers may also want to dip into *The Tony Hillerman Companion*, a fine study by Martin Greenberg.

In recent years my wife and I came to share Hillerman's appreciation of North American culture, and on trips to the Southwest made a point of visiting several tribal pueblos to witness their ceremonies and lifestyle. Shortly after reviewing one of his novels he and I talked by phone. He complained that it was becoming harder to remember the names of his characters when he was writing. We made plans to get together the next time I was in Albuquerque. To my regret, what with one thing and another, it didn't happen. A lesson about things put off.

Tony Hillerman was born on May 27, 1925, and died on October 26, 2008, aged 83. He is survived by his wife of 60 years and their six children, and he will be missed.

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