

Death in the Desert

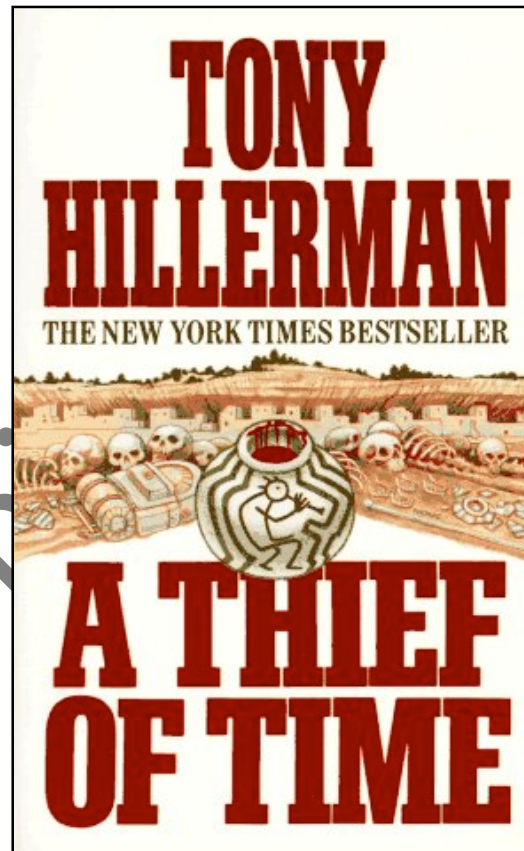
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

A change of pace this week—a story set not in the mean streets of a big city, nor in a bucolic village somewhere in rural Britain, but in the spare, primal setting of the American Southwest. It is a world of dusty roads and trailer life, native schools and Navajo ways, vintage pick-ups with gun racks in their rear windows, and a vanishing people trying to hold on to their values and traditions against the inroads of the white man's world. All this is eloquently and gripingly described by Tony Hillerman in his Native American mystery classic, *A Thief of Time*.

Tony Hillerman

Tony Hillerman is one of a handful of mostly native novelists who have set out to record and reveal the culture of Native North Americans in the American Southwest. Born in rural Oklahoma in 1925, Hillerman went to an Indian boarding school and served in the US Army during WW II, where he received both the Silver and Bronze Stars for heroism in action, and 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 circumstances. 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 '60's. In 1986 he published what is generally regarded as his breakthrough novel, *Skinwalkers*. This has been fol-



lowed by no less than 17 other novels featuring the native police investigators Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. Hillerman also has a number of highly-regarded non-fiction works to his credit, all dealing with native culture or the American Southwest. A former President of the Mystery Writers of America, Hillerman was named a Grandmaster of the MWA in 1991 in recognition of his lifelong contributions to the field of mystery writing. *A Thief of Time* is his personal favourite. Hillerman and his wife Marie live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

A Thief of Time
(HarperCollins, 1990)

Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Officer Jim Chee are members of the Navajo Tribal Police in the Four Corners region of the American Southwest. Leaphorn, grieving over the recent death of his wife, has put in for retirement, struggling to recapture some meaning in his life. Chee has also lost his partner, a *belangana*, or white woman, who was unwilling to surrender her own identity to satisfy her lover's need for a partner immersed in Navajo ways. While each grapples in his own way with his loss, they search for anthropologist Eleanor Friedman-Bernal, who has gone missing in the desert while researching native artifacts. Meanwhile, a backhoe has been stolen from a government maintenance yard, and the search for it leads Chee to a dealer in Anasazi pots, and to the bodies of two men (and the missing backhoe) at a native burial site. Leaphorn quizzes an elderly recluse and pot-collector, Harrison Houk, whose son had died decades earlier after going on a rampage and killing most of his family. When Houk himself is found dead, and the missing anthropologist's handgun is linked to all three killings, Leaphorn is unsure whether he is searching for a victim or a villain.

Perfectly suited to its subject

Initially published in 1988, *A Thief of Time* has gone through several editions, the most recent being a hardcover version released in 1999. Evocative and well-paced, with understated, spare dialogue that suits the characters and their culture, it reads effortlessly—a sure sign of a talented writer. Hillerman captures perfectly the cadence of Navajo speech, with its short sentences and simple, straight-to-the-point dialogue.

The settings, too, are convincingly described, using actual place names like Window Rock, Mexican Hat, and Yah-Ta-Hey. *A Thief of Time* has become a true classic, perfectly suited to its subject, and as much a depiction of a way of life as a challenging puzzle. I recommend it highly.

*Tony Hillerman died in October of 2008.
A tribute may be found in these pages.*

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