

SPECIAL ISSUE

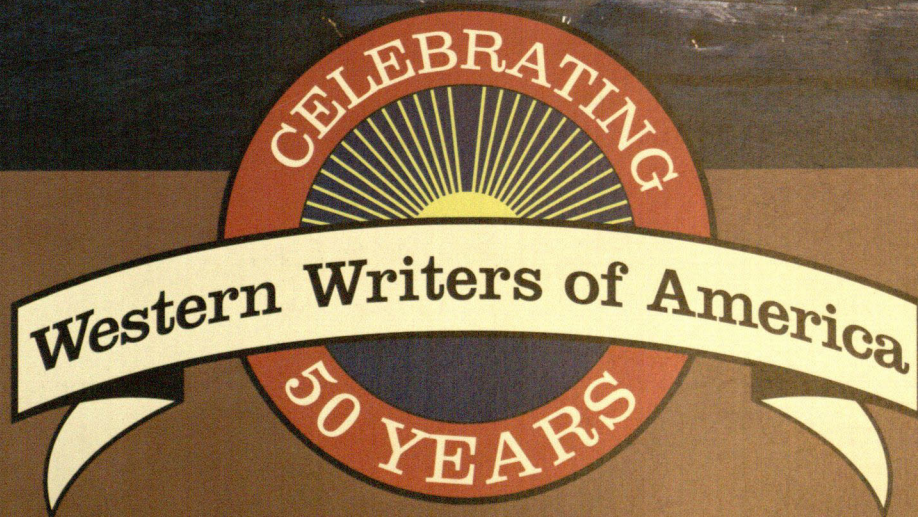
Western Writers of America

June 2003

ROUNDUP

MAGAZINE

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WWA Anniversary Special Edition
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Editors of the Roundup

1952-53	Nelson C. Nye
1954-62	Leslie Ernenwein
1962-65	Gordon Baldwin
1966-71	Betty Baker
1971-78	Kenneth Fowler
1978-80	Gerald Keenan and Steve Overholser
1980-85	Dale L. Walker
1986-88	Richard C. House
1988-93	Judy Alter
1993-95	S. Gail Miller
1995-	Candy Moulton

Here Come The Indians!

D.L. Birchfield

The assault by fictional Indian protagonists on the bastions of Western publishing hasn't exactly been so overpowering as to be comparable to anything like what Custer's 7th Cavalry troop was seeing during its final moments; on the other hand, it hasn't been anything comparable to what the 7th Cavalry was seeing a few years later at Wounded Knee, either.

It's somewhere in between; where, is hard to say, but one thing's for certain—the very presence of Indian protagonists in Western fiction makes for a different Indian literary landscape now than when Western Writers of America was founded, some fifty years ago. It's different in many other ways, too, but it is a fundamental difference—for Indian and non-Indian writers alike, for both historical and contemporary fiction—that Indians can now be the “good guys.”

That didn't happen naturally or easily. Of all the writers who've helped make that happen, two are particularly noteworthy for helping to kick that door open wide enough for it to stay open—one is an Indian and one is a non-Indian, one writes historical and one writes contemporary. Indians first.

He's a man who was born on a bad day, a man who will likely forever be haunted by the weight of his knowledge of historical events on the 29th day of December. Imagine being any kind of Indian, and then discover you'd been born on the day the 7th Cavalry opened fire at Wounded Knee. Imagine being Cherokee, and then discover you'd been born on the day the Treaty of New Ecohta was signed. Imagine being a theatre major in college and learning to love Shakespeare and English lit and English history, and then discover you'd been born on the day Thomas Beckett was murdered. Imagine going off to college in Texas and learning how Texans have loved Indians, and then discover you were born on the day Texas was admitted to statehood.

It's enough to drive a man to drink, which might explain a whole lot to anyone who's strolled through the bar of a WWA convention, at just about anytime, at just about any WWA convention.

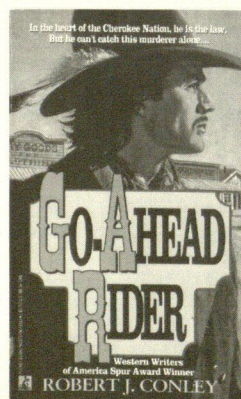
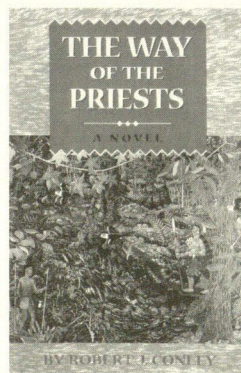
Imagine growing middle-aged amid the recurring nightmare of grading exams and research papers, and trying to compete for attention with testosterone-induced mating frenzies, and the droning-on of deadly boring deans, and the ever-escalating eccentricities of colleagues only tenuously in touch with reality, to where your ambitions in life have

narrowed to only hoping to live long enough to found an organization you'd call “Academics Anonymous” and become its first member.

Imagine that tormented soul, with a phone cradled to his ear, listening to his would-be editor in New York telling him that his manuscript is all wrong because America isn't yet ready for an Indian good guy in a Western, but maybe, maybe if he'd change the Indian to a white guy's sidekick, maybe the editor would have another look at it.



Robert Conley



No, we're not talking about the guy who created the Lone Ranger and Tonto, though our tormented soul did tell that editor that what he was suggesting had already been done. No, our tormented soul took that editor's advice, and he went back to work on his trusty old typewriter.

He wrote *Strange Company*, a Civil War yarn set in Indian Territory, about a couple of escaped military prisoners chained together—a Harvard College-educated Cherokee, side-kicking a semi-literate Iowa farm boy named Ben Franklin, who thought he'd been named after a President of the United States.

New York knew it had met its match and promptly surrendered. About a kazillion books and three Spur Awards later, Robert J. Conley is still cranking them out. But first, he did found “Academics Anonymous,” and he did become its first card-carrying member, as well as its “World-Wide Executive Director.” Now brethren who are in danger of recidivism can pick up the phone and be gently talked down until the temptation passes.

Conley's Indian-protagonist Western fiction novels have achieved a number of things for

Indians. In some books, such as his Cherokee Nation Sheriff Go-Ahead Rider Western mystery series, many readers who otherwise might never be exposed to such information are able to learn a simple and fundamental, yet little known thing—that the Cherokees had their own sovereign nation in Indian Territory before Oklahoma statehood took it away. They'll also get a hint that the Cherokees aren't likely to ever give up on trying to get it back. That's a subtle way of making mainstream America aware of some contemporary American Indian political issues.

Other books, such as *Ned Christie's War*, poke fun at Western historians. Conley finally got tired of reading that Ned Christie was by far the worst outlaw in the history of the West. Of course, Conley had the advantage of knowing that the only reason Ned Christie has been vilified by history is because he'd dared oppose the allotment of Cherokee land—that he'd never robbed anybody, never raped anybody, that the only time he'd been accused of killing anyone he'd been acquitted in a trial, and that the whole time he was a wanted man, about all he'd done, except for fighting back against the posses that were trying to arrest him, was sit at home in his cabin.

Now lots of readers know that, too—the point being that they are mostly readers who'd never have learned it by reading a work of historical scholarship. Conley's audience is bigger. It's not an academic audience. In a way, it's much more modest. In a way, it's much more ambitious. His books are in every Wal-Mart in North America (which we call "Choctaw Cultural Centers" in Oklahoma).

I hate doing literary criticism. I especially hate it when the writer has won the Cherokee Medal of Honor from the Cherokee Honor Society and has been inducted into the Oklahoma Professional Writers Hall of Fame. I hate tarnishing the reputation of heroes, but my conscience would not let me rest if I did not point out that while Conley may be a great writer and a trailblazer and someone to whom Indian writers owe a debt, his sense of historical accuracy leaves something to be desired.

In that same *Strange Company*, mentioned earlier, he has one lone Cherokee traveling down the road toward Texas when he comes upon a road block manned by half a dozen Confederate Choctaws. In this highly improbable tale, that lone Cherokee kills every one of those Choctaws in a gun fight. Now I (a loyal Choctaw) ask you, what are the odds of that happening?

This propensity to play loose with historical probabilities surfaces again and again in his work. In the very first volume of his dozen-volume-and-counting *Real People* series, he's got three disgruntled Choctaws returning from a stickball match in the Cherokee country and says that the Cherokees won the ball game. In his dreams, maybe, but not likely in history.

To top that off, those same three disgruntled Choctaws

then try to take outrageous liberties with a young Cherokee woman. Now, mind you, despite the fact that our very own Choctaw chief is this very minute doing ten years without possibility of parole in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary for multiple counts of sexual molestation of female CHOCTAW tribal employees, there is no evidence whatsoever in all of history of any Choctaws ever trying to impose themselves indecently on any CHEROKEE women.

To compound that historical improbability even more, those same three disgruntled Choctaws then conclude among themselves that their actions had been wrong. Now, what are the odds of ANY three Choctaws ever concluding that they'd been wrong about ANYTHING?

If our trailblazing writer of Indian-protagonist historical Western fiction has trouble getting his historical probabilities right, it is indeed an irony that our trailblazing writer of

Indian-protagonist contemporary Western fiction caused some unanticipated problems by getting his facts a little too right.

Tony Hillerman almost didn't get the chance to get it right, or to get it wrong—not regarding Indians anyway. In his first volume of the hugely successful Navajo Tribal Police mystery series, his Navajo sleuth, Joe Leaphorn, was nearly a minor character, minor enough anyway that he was excisable in the opinion of the editor who tried to talk Hillerman into "getting rid of the Indian stuff" so he might have a more publishable book.

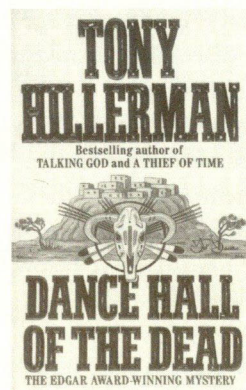
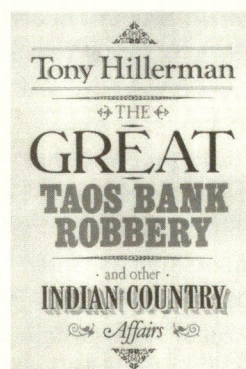
Hillerman sought the services of another publisher, and the rest, as they say, is history.

It was the second book in that series, however, that made history, both for Hillerman and for

Indians. *Dance Hall Of The Dead* won the Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America and rocketed that series on its way to a Spur for a later volume, *Skinwalkers*.

Hillerman, the consummate essayist and meticulously careful journalist, set the dénouement for *Dance Hall Of The Dead* during the Zuni Pueblo Shalako ceremonies, the holiest time of the year for the Zunis. And he did his homework, attending Shalako and drinking it all in, as only a gifted novelist and essayist might.

And then he wrote about it so vividly and so enchantingly that, when the book came out, housewives and sales clerks from Sacramento to Newark mistook Shalako for a tourist attraction and inundated the event the next year, to the extent that the befuddled Zunis had to cancel Shalako for



the following year while they tried to figure out what to do. Some Zunis wanted to sell hot dogs and rent parking spaces and cash in on it, while more traditional Zunis were appalled at the very thought.

I don't know what Hillerman might have thought about all of that. I kept quiet when I had an opportunity to ask him about it a few years ago. The fact that five years passed before another book was published in that series says enough for me. That, and the fact that he soon began demonstrating a sensitivity to fragile things, even telling the readers in an author's note in *A Thief Of Time* not to bother looking for Many Ruins Canyon, the enchanting site of much of that book, because he'd disguised its location. Ultimately, by the time he wrote *Sacred Clowns*, he adopted the sensible approach of making up both a fictitious pueblo and a fictitious tribe.

Nobody could have anticipated the impact that a work of fiction like *Dance Hall Of The Dead* could have on an Indian tribe. It is to Hillerman's credit that he found ways to avoid those kinds of problems in the future. It also made some Native writers aware of some of the potential problems that we might cause by our own work. Different writers have dealt with those potential problems in different ways.

In *The Redbird's Cry*, Oklahoma Cherokee mystery writer Jean Hager, who writes the Molly Bearpaw mystery series, which is set mostly in the Cherokee capitol of Tahlequah, has the focus of her action, as well as the scene of the crime, at the Cherokee Heritage Center—the great tourist trap of the Cherokee Nation, and, presumably, the place that Cherokees would most likely want tourists to be directed to.

Former WWA member and Choctaw novelist Ron Querry, in *The Death Of Bernadette Lefthand*, has his Navajo and Jicarilla Apache characters travel to a ceremony among the Hopis. He also has the Hopi clowns make an appearance, standing on the rooftops, peeing on the tourists down below, which might cause a Sacramento housewife to think twice about booking that Hopi ceremony for her next vacation.

Aside from this sort of thing, however, there is something fundamentally important about Hillerman's work to Indian people throughout North America, as well as to Navajos, who have honored Hillerman with the Navajo Nation's "Special Friend Award." Legions of mainstream white American readers have gained their only acquaintance with the concept of contemporary Indian governmental sovereignty through the pages of his work. You can hardly walk through a book store without tripping over special display cases of his Navajo mysteries, and every one of them is a beacon proclaiming that things are changing in Indian Country.

Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee are cops. They can stop you and give you a speeding ticket. They can take you to jail if you're driving drunk—to a Navajo Nation Indian jail.

Even the most simple-minded dullard understands police

powers. But this, too, is a subtle thing, this message that Indians are still with us, and that, depending upon where you go driving, there just might be a new sheriff in town.

Try finding that notion fifty years ago, in Western Writers of America or on any Indian reservation. Official United States policy fifty years ago was "termination" of Indian tribes, relocation of tribal members to far-away urban centers (a background thread, by the way, of Hillerman's plot in *Skinwalkers*), and other self-fulfilling helpers for the notion that Indians were a dying and disappearing people.

Times have changed, and Hillerman has been a messenger of some of those changes. Conley has been a sort of messenger too, that the portrayal of times past have had some pretty big missing pieces. We're not talking about revisionist things here. We're talking about the invisibility of a Native people within a dominant culture, from having been voiceless within that dominant culture.

There were reasons why America resisted Indian protagonists in commercial fiction, in fiction that reaches the masses. With Indian protagonists, you get Indian viewpoint, even from non-Indian writers—the inherently sympathetic aspects of narrative point of view, as a matter of craft. With Indian viewpoint you get subtle challenges to the status quo, even when it doesn't overtly appear to be anything political, anything threatening.

There is a rule of thumb that popular fiction, genre fiction, by its very nature upholds the status quo, upholds the values of a culture. That's true of Westerns, Mysteries, Romances, and all other genres. For all its appearance of naughtiness, the Romance genre fundamentally upholds the institution of marriage, with marriage typically being the goal or the result of the quest. In Mysteries, murderers are brought to justice. In Westerns, good triumphs over evil, or order prevails over chaos, or some wrong is righted. When things step very far outside those bounds, the feeling that the genre has been violated is palpable, and the work becomes regarded as something else.

But Hillerman and Conley have never been shunned by their genres. Indeed, they've been embraced by them, nurtured by them, with both an early Edgar and an early Spur. Perhaps Hillerman and Conley are evidence that America itself is changing, and has been changing, and is more willing now to embrace more of its past and more of its present, more willing now to try allowing Indians to remain Indians.

The publishing of Western fiction has an influence beyond the mere entertainment that most of its readers are seeking. In its most profound sense, law is culture, it is custom, it is a habit of thinking. When a culture experiences a sea change in its view of something, formal changes in law are not far behind.

Indians have waited a long time for repressive attitudes to change, have weathered monumental assaults on their

languages, religions, cultures, and yet they have endured, have somehow survived into the twentieth Century. But whether they continue making gains toward self determination is out of their hands. As President Thomas Jefferson once said, "They must see we have only to shut our hand to crush them, & that all our liberalities to them proceed from matters of pure humanity only."

In a democracy, nothing is more important than public opinion. Writers of popular fiction play a role in molding and shaping attitudes that can have a far-reaching influence, though that is often a slow, gradual, cumulative process.

In any event, it's hard to close the kind of doors that Conley and Hillerman have helped kick open. There are other writers, some earlier, some later, who have also helped kick those doors open, and a more comprehensive piece would include the considerable contributions of a number of other people. But Conley and Hillerman have achieved a kind of a visibility and an influence and a following that make their work stand out as landmarks in this process.

Their work also stands out for inspiring other writers, who have seen what they have done and who are trying to do likewise. Hillerman's now-legendary success is resulting in new contemporary Indian mystery series popping up like mushrooms, by both Indian and non-Indian writers.

Conley's presence, for several decades now, at the core of the continent's coterie of Native literati, going all the way back to his younger days when he was known only as an extraordinary Indian poet, has insured that the sorts of things he's shown that can be done will continue being done by succeeding generations of Indian writers. There are few Indian intellectuals who don't know who he is.

A wider exposure to Indian viewpoint—both subtle and not so subtle—of the sort that commercially viable fiction can provide, is not likely to go away. Indian protagonists in Western fiction are here to stay, and there is going to be a howling bunch more of them coming over the hill. Personally, I think that's healthy for America, healthy for Indians, and healthy for Western fiction.



For the past eight years, Don Birchfield has been Roundup Magazine copy editor. A member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, he is currently Associate Professor of Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, where he teaches American Indian law and Canadian Aboriginal law. He has taught American Indian Studies at Cornell University, the

University of New Mexico, and the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay. He was general editor of the eleven-volume Encyclopedia Of North American Indians, and was associate editor

of Durable Breath, an anthology of contemporary American Indian poetry. His essay collection, The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test, won the Louis Littlecoon Oliver Memorial Prose Award from the University of Oklahoma and the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas. His poetry and short stories have been anthologized in a number of collections in both the U.S. and in Canada. He has published nineteen books for children on Indian topics, many of them tribal history text books and Indian biographies. He has served on the editorial staff of many publications, including Studies In American Indian Literatures, News From Indian Country, and Native Americas. For the past ten years he has been a member of the board of directors for Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers & Storytellers, a mentoring organization that conducts workshops for emerging Native writers on campuses and reservations throughout the continent. His first novel, Field Of Honor, is currently in press in the American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series at the University of Oklahoma Press, and he is now at work on A History Of The Choctaws for the University of New Mexico Press.

DISCOVERING WWA (from page 24)

Twenty-first century morality and ethics cannot be applied to characters in the nineteenth Century.

Back to the Western, the genre that is our own. It's been said that in the publishing world, if it's Western, it can't be any good. If it's good... Well, it wasn't really a "Western" was it? This, despite at least five Pulitzers for Westerns since World War II. (Pullet Surprises?)

The Western. . . . What is it, anyway? Or where? James Fenimore Cooper's "West" was New York and Pennsylvania. Zane Grey's included Ohio to Utah. Jack London's was Alaska. *The Man From Snowy River* takes place in Australia. For every definition there are exceptions.

In the final exam for the one college class that I teach, "The Western; from Pulps to Pulitzers," I include this question: "Why has the Western never been adequately defined?" There's no wrong answer, but the best in seventeen years was simple: "Because everyplace is west of someplace else."

Maybe that's it.... The West is not a place, but a state of mind.



*Don Coldsmith, the 2003 Owen Wister Award recipient for Lifetime Achievement in Western writing, has written more than forty novels, 150 articles, and 1600 newspaper columns. Four million copies of Don Coldsmith's books are in print at this writing. He won the Spur Award for best original paperback in 1990 for *The Changing Wind*.*