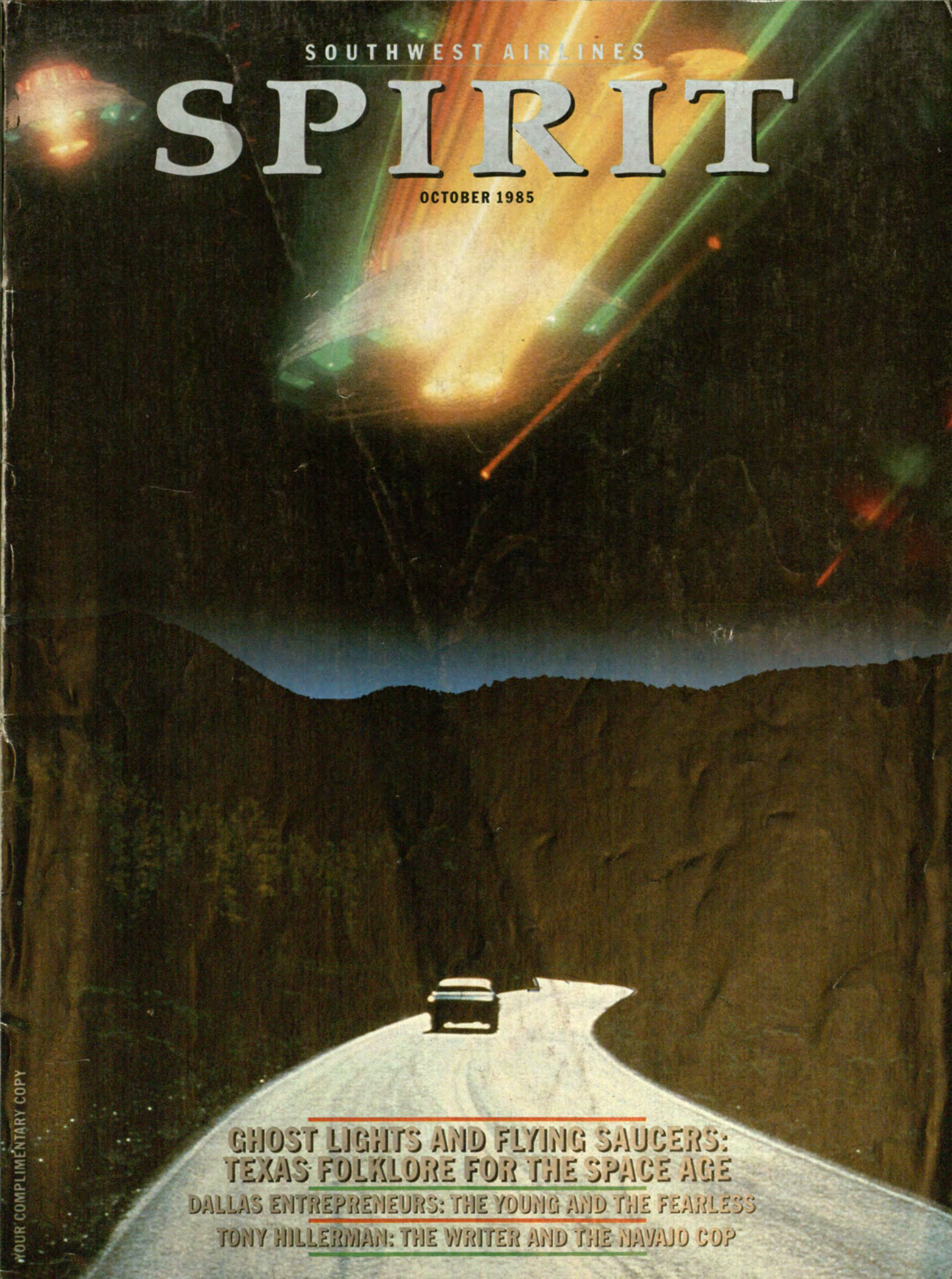


SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

SPIRIT

OCTOBER 1985



**GHOST LIGHTS AND FLYING SAUCERS:
TEXAS FOLKLORE FOR THE SPACE AGE**

DALLAS ENTREPRENEURS: THE YOUNG AND THE FEARLESS

TONY HILLERMAN: THE WRITER AND THE NAVAJO COP

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THE WRITER AND THE NAVAJO COP

From remote east-facing hogans to dark barrooms in Gallup, from ceremonial sings to the state pen, Tony Hillerman's mysteries unfold along a fault line where cultures collide.

Hosteen Joseph Joe remembered it like this.

He'd noticed the green car just as he came out of the Shiprock Economy Wash-O-Mat. . . .

The opening lines of Tony Hillerman's latest book, *The Ghostway*, are a taste of what he does so adroitly. He juxtaposes an ancient culture and a modern one and lets mystery burgeon in the deep shadows of contrast.

The old Navajo and the laundromat. Then shots and death and another galloping good read is under way.

The short chapter ends: *The driver was Navajo but this was white man's business.*

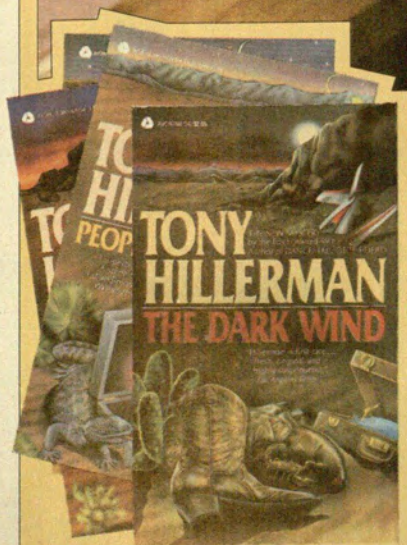
Hillerman then lets his detective, a Navajo tribal policeman with a foot in both cultures, follow the labyrinthine path to solution. That path leads him—and the reader—across the stark beauty of the Navajo reservation, along dusty tracks in pickup trucks, to Navajo sings on a moonlit mesa, and even to Los Angeles haunts of displaced Navajos.

Hillerman does it deftly, economically and with such a feeling for the area that Southwesterners advise their friends back East to read Hillerman's mysteries (seven of them in fifteen years) as guidebooks as well as for pleasure.

Hillerman draws on a former wire service reporter's knowledge of crime and a lifelong interest in Indian lore to instill a unique flavor into his stories. ►

BY DENISE McCLUGGAGE

OP



TONY HILLERMAN grew up in Oklahoma during the Great Depression and now lives and writes in Albuquerque. "There's never been a time of my life, except for brief periods, that I haven't lived around Indians," he says. His mysteries are imbued with such an authentic feel for New Mexico and its Indian culture that Southwesterners recommend them to their friends as guide-books as well as entertainment.

PHOTO: RICHARD PIPES

"There's never been a time of my life, except for brief periods, that I haven't lived around Indians," Hillerman says. First the Seminole, Potawatomi and Blackfoot of his Oklahoma childhood, and now the Southwestern Indians—Navajo, Hopi, Zuni.

"I've always been interested in what I guess you'd call metaphysical beliefs. Beliefs beyond science. In religions, in superstitions, in value systems that are based not on physical laws but on spiritual values."

Maybe it was the experience of being one of some dozen boys in a Catholic boarding school for Indian girls—the nearest school to his farm home—that gave him his understanding of what it means to be a minority and his fascination for that shifting shoreline where different cultures meet.

He does not, however, presume scholarship in Indian matters or any special insight. And totally absent is the arrogance of any claim to speak for the Indian.

"Oliver La Farge, for instance, was dedicated to protecting the Indian culture—in place. That's all very well. I respect that attitude. But if I were an Indian I'm not so sure how I would feel. I can certainly see that something's to be said for these young Indians wanting to step off the reservation and leave their culture behind. Particularly when staying means they will be denied certain material benefits—like enough to eat."

Hillerman now lives in Albuquerque, having just retired from teaching journalism and creative writing at the University of New Mexico, but Oklahoma still paces his speech, and for all his adventures, he has not left his native country far behind.

His school years were the Great Depression years, and the "Okies" were blowing westward with the red dust. "We lived next door to the Joads," he jokes, "but we were too poor to follow them to California."

Hillerman is a big man with an easy manner, as open as the Southwestern sky. His curiosity is receptive, not aggressive. "I don't know anything about Indians that anybody who's been interested as long as I have couldn't know by getting acquainted with Indians and being curious," he maintains.

He probably believes that, and he is probably wrong. He is the sort of person to whom people tell more than they intended. But without regret. Besides the writing courses at the uni-

versity, he also taught ethics.

And more than being curious, Hillerman knows what questions to ask and where to get them answered. "Navajos are very up-front," he says. "For instance, they don't have any secret societies. At least none that I know of." He looks bemused by that thought for a moment.

In contrast with the Hopi, whose societies are not only secret to outsiders but secret to each other, the Navajos are open books. "I've never had a Navajo refuse to answer any question I've asked," he says. "Of course, they have a great sense of humor and sometimes they give you a baloney answer. But you learn after a while. I never believe anything until I've heard it from three or four sources."

HILLERMAN
believes that his years
with United Press had a
particular impact on his
style. He would turn in a
compact 550 words on
a subject. The editor
would say, 'Good job,
Tony. Now cut it down
to 200.' His writing is as
lean as a reservation
hound dog.

Generally, he gets it right even by the strictest of critics, the Navajos themselves. "I have my Navajo friends read the books and tell me if I've done anything wrong," he says.

Reasonableness is what he is after. Would this be likely? Is that probable? "A Navajo told me that the little boy in *Dance Hall of the Dead* would have been shier than he was with the policeman," Hillerman says. "My cop-out was that there had to be some room for individual differences." So he stuck by it, and *Dance Hall of the Dead* won an Edgar, the Oscar of mystery books.

Other Navajos have been uneasy with what they perceive as an over-emphasis on ghosts and witchcraft in

his books. They object particularly when his Indian characters speak freely of "corpse powder," something they would not do, according to Della Toadlena, a Navajo who teaches English composition at Navajo Community College, in Tsalie, Arizona.

"Moreover," she says, "witches coming out when the moon is full is not a Navajo concept but a *bilagaanaa* [white man's] belief." She says Hillerman gets some of the details of the various ceremonies wrong too, but she is fearful of being too critical, since she is as enthralled as other readers by Hillerman's ability to tell a story.

She is also delighted by the effect the books have on young Navajos: "Children who would not ordinarily be interested in books are reading them," she says.

Hillerman, too, is most pleased by reports from reservation librarians that Navajo boys who never set foot near the library before are now coming to read his books. The students of the Indian School in Santa Fe chose him as their favorite author.

He also heard that an Anglo trading post operator in Navajo country asked all his new employees to read his books. Hillerman is a little uneasy when people bestow such authority on his work. "I'm an entertainer," he says. And that's all the responsibility he wants. That and reasonableness.

Hillerman's books have a stirring sense of place, of the chimerical weather of the area, of the mind-shifting scale of the unyielding landscape. He transmits that sense in direct images, tersely evoked, and imparts an appreciation of the Navajo people who have walked this land for unwritten generations.

In addition to the mysteries, Hillerman's books include a nonfiction anthology called *The Spell of New Mexico*, which newcomers to the state often send back to old friends as explanation for their fascination with the region. His first book, *The Great Taos Bank Robbery*, a collection of humorous, historical pieces he wrote as a graduate student, has become a classic of its genre.

Tony Hillerman put his foot on the path to writing quite by accident. His childhood interests were military campaigns and tactics—Caesar, Pizarro, Alexander the Great, Robert E. Lee—and chemistry. He thought it likely that he would be a chemist or a

—continued on page 126

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chemical engineer, until some World War II campaigns changed his plans for him.

After his father died, when Hillerman was sixteen, his mother, older brother and older sister held a family conference and decided he should go to college. "Tuition in a state college wasn't much then," he remembers, yet they could put together only enough money to pay one month's tu-

ition and one month's room rent and to buy textbooks. "I think I had \$10 left over," he says.

He took three jobs, including dishwasher and house cleaner, then "the war came along and rescued me." Rescued? "I would probably have flunked out with that load."

Twice he made PFC (once busted for forgetting to sew on his new stripes) and twice he was decorated. But he dismisses that part as "a fran-

tic effort to keep from getting killed." He barely succeeded. A percussion grenade in Alsace escorted him out of the army and nearly robbed him of his sight.

By the time he got home, his right eye was again serviceable and his left eye was beginning to be. Still, it was obvious to him that a career in chemistry was out of the question. "I didn't know what I could do," he says.

The decision had been made for him. While he was in Europe his proud mother had shown some of his letters to a newspaper woman who had come to do a story on him. "Have him come and see me when he gets home," the woman had said.

"She told me I should become a writer," says Hillerman.

A cousin who had been a pre-med student aiming for surgeon before the war was in a similar fix. Half his hand was blown away in the war. When the two of them got together to discuss careers, Hillerman told him he was going to try being a journalist. "And he said, 'I will, too.'"

That cousin was the late Larry Grove, who for years wrote a front-page column, "Larry's Almanac," for the *Dallas Morning News*.

A degree from the University of Oklahoma was the next step for Tony Hillerman, then political reporter, editor, master's degree candidate, college administrator, professor and novelist. He met his wife, Marie Unzner, at the university, and is now the father of six—three boys and three girls.

Hillerman believes that his years with United Press had a particular impact on his writing style. "I'd turn in a compact 550 words on a subject. The editor would say, 'Good job, Tony. Now cut it down to 200.'" Hillerman's writing is as lean as a reservation hound dog. When he goes back over his novels it is never to cut, but to flesh out, to make less cryptic.

Whenever he has trouble in writing a book—and he says he always does—he worries it patiently like a whittler at a stick, confident that there is something in there that wants to be let out. Part of this process involves talking about his false starts, his dead-ends, his blocks.

"I tell my students there's no such thing as a writer's block, that you just write right through it," he says. "But when it comes to me, well, I go fishing

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up near Chama."

With a book in progress, he talks freely about his characters and situations, and he does so with the slightly unfocused eyes of one attending to internal pictures, sorting through images—alert for new connections to appear, to tumble out of hiding and into place.

Like the deus ex machina who came swinging in on a crane to resolve ancient dramas, something has always turned up to rescue Hillerman from seemingly insoluble dilemmas. For *The Dark Wind*, his book before *The Ghostway*, it was a chance item in an Indian newspaper. Stuck in his progression on *The Dark Wind*, Hillerman, along with his wife, had climbed into the couple's pickup and headed for the Arizona reservations "hoping for, trusting in, inspiration." While he was there, he says, "someone had the common decency to vandalize a windmill." He read about it in the Hopi weekly paper.

It was an anomalous act, just the sort of thing Hillerman's Navajo detectives—culturally conditioned to expect an ordered world, causally connected—needed to muse about. And the vandalized windmill, which he appropriated, provided the cord on which to string all the beads in his book.

The plot required his detective, Jim Chee, to be at a certain remote place where he would witness, by chance, certain important matters, and it needed him to return there time and again. Those were the author's needs, but Hillerman is not one to order his characters around just because it suits a purpose. So enter the windmill; re-enter reasonableness. And the book raced to its completion.

The Hillerman mysteries all take place along that fault line where cultures abut. Hillerman is comfortable on both sides of that line without being patronizing, condescending or a show-off. What he knows mixes in like salt and seasons evenly. From remote east-facing hogans to dark barrooms in Gallup, from ceremonial sings to the state pen, a rightness—the Hillerman reasonableness—is pervasive.

Both worlds, Indian and Anglo, modern and ancient, are simply *there*, interacting: lost rockets from the missile range, Navajo witches, radioactive material, the tension over the Navajo-

Hopi shared lands, cocaine smuggling. And always it is some point of difference between the cultures on which the solution pivots.

First, the contrast was largely between Navajo and non-Navajo ways—whites, Zunis, Hopi. Then, as in *The Dark Wind* and *The Ghostway*, the plot turned on differences between reservation Navajos and "relocation" Navajos who grew up in cities such as Los Angeles, and whose ways are as

alien to their brothers on the reservation as any white person's ways.

For instance, to a traditionally raised Navajo, killing another human for material gain or profit is an alien notion. And so is the idea of revenge. To a traditional Navajo, evil behavior is the result of a dark wind blowing through the soul, so avenging an evil act makes no sense at all.

The Ghostway involves, besides such things as a car theft ring special-



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izing in fancy cars and the federal government's protected-witness program, a Los Angeles Navajo who goes to the reservation for nefarious reasons of his own. His ignorance of traditional Navajo ways makes him highly visible to other Navajos.

Prominent in *The Ghostway* is the Navajo attitude toward the family, an extended clan. To Navajos, the ultimate put-down is to say, "He behaves as if he has no family," so important

are their tight family connections. Also important in the book is the traditional Navajo attitude toward death and the belief that a building is contaminated by someone's dying in it.

Hillerman's Navajo policemen provide a bridge for the Anglo reader to the Navajo world. Yet when it comes to the Hopi or Zuni world, the Navajo is as much a stranger as the reader. Both learn together.

After three books with Lieutenant

Joe Leaphorn as the Navajo detective, Hillerman felt a need to reposition his leading character on that bridge. "I needed a younger man who was not as knowledgeable about white people and more curious about them." So Sergeant Jim Chee was brought on for *People of Darkness* and has remained.

Chee is also more involved in his own culture than Leaphorn and is learning complicated ceremonial sings from his grandfather. Jim Chee is also conveniently unmarried, thus affording some love interest, including an affair with an Anglo woman.

Hillerman is currently working on a new mystery. It will unite Chee and Leaphorn, something many of his readers have been hoping for. With Leaphorn less a traditionalist than Chee, the book will deal with the differences among reservation Navajos.

Hillerman's mysteries are so strongly visual, so full of action, that everyone has the same question: will there be a movie?

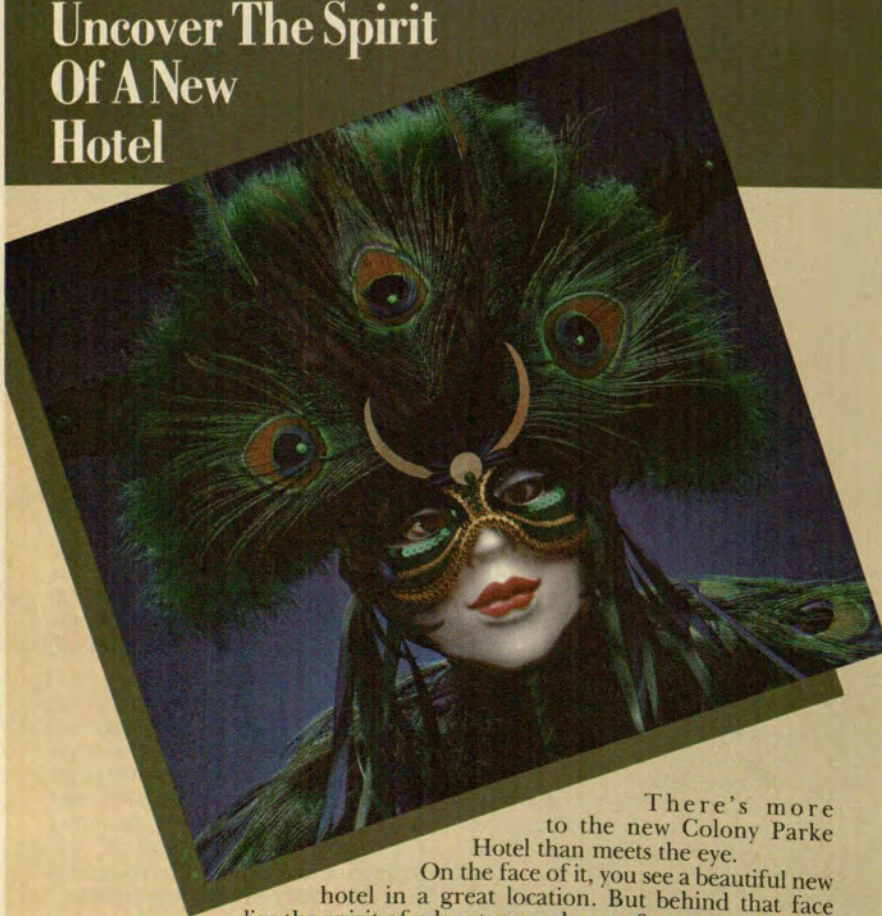
"I've never been without at least one book under option," Hillerman says. "Right now there are five." But he doesn't expect anything to come of it. After years of "taking meetings" with both movie and television people, he has collected enough Hollywood tales to keep him dining out for a long time. He says that at first movie moguls sent him a plane ticket and dispatched a limo to meet him and then gradually cut back until they just gave him a date they'd expect to see him.

The TV people and the moviemakers seem to be put off by the very thing that made the books attractive to them in the first place: the uniqueness of the reservation setting, the esoterica of a Navajo cop and the Indian ceremonies. They love it, love it. And they want everything changed.

"What the TV people really want are three ongoing characters—a cop, a young woman and Gabby Hayes," Hillerman says. They tell him the Navajo policeman has to go. It's demographics: They want to appeal to the urban young whites, so it can't be on the reservation. Move it to the city. And, in *Dance Hall*, the kid can't die. Endings must be upbeat. And none of that anthropology. Too deep.

Hillerman smiles. "It's a funny business out there. But then if you get on the plane for L.A., why pretend to be innocent?"

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