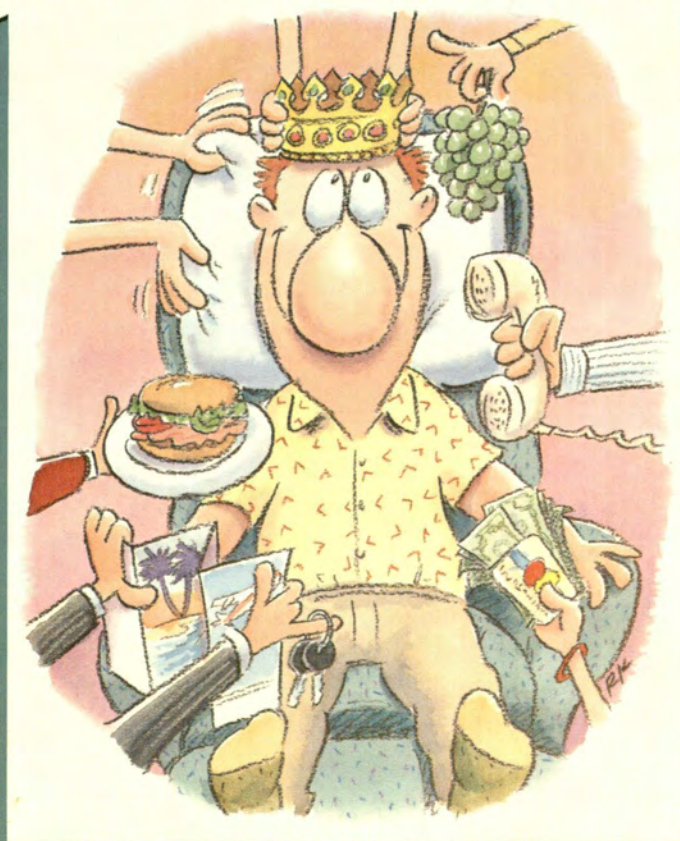


# Arizona

# STATE

SPRING/1991

# SERVICES



**DEFINING THE ELEMENTS THAT  
KEEP THE CUSTOMER SATISFIED**



# INSIDE *Arizona* STATE SPRING/1991

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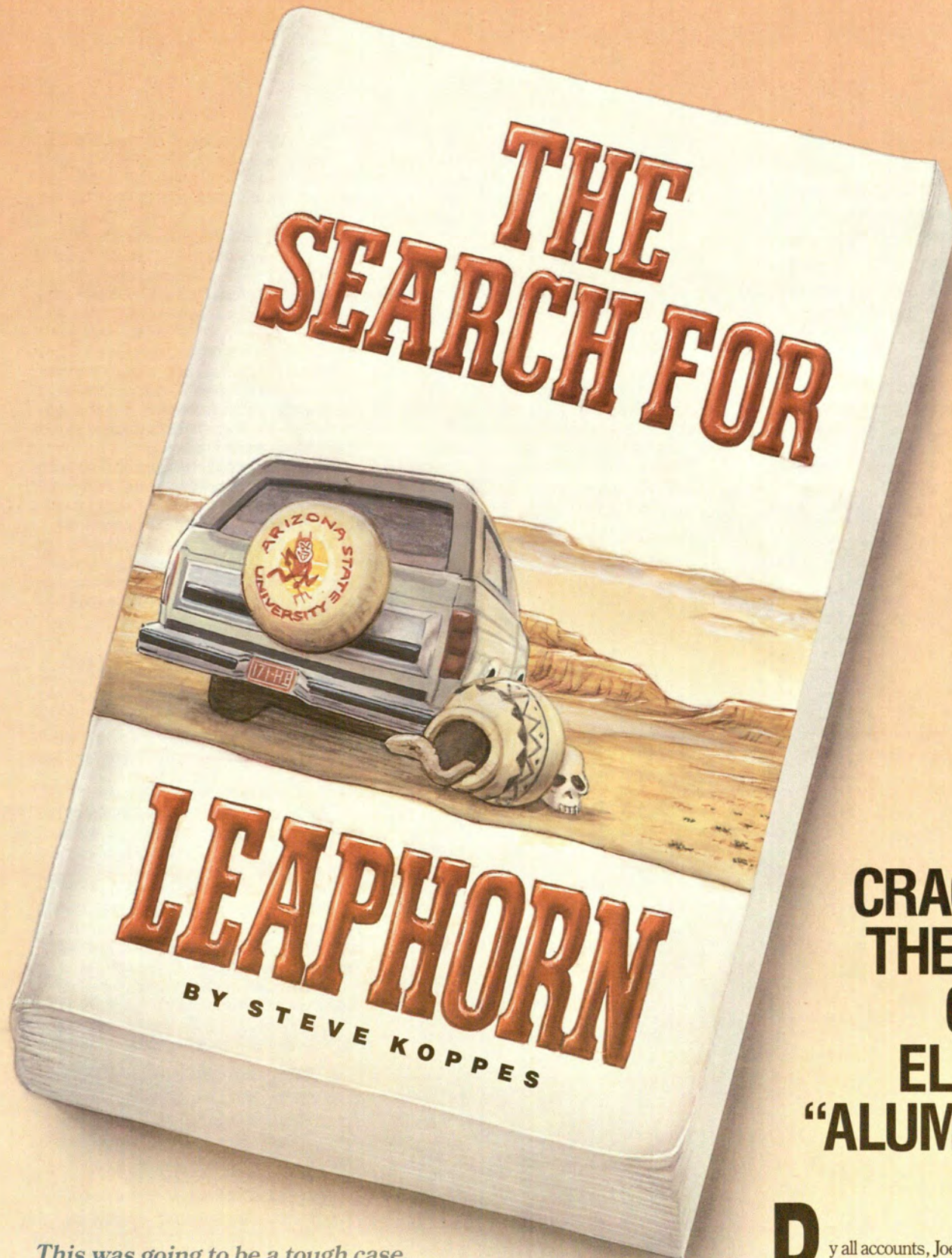
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ON THE COVER: Illustration by Rick Kirkman.





## CRACKING THE CASE ON AN ELUSIVE “ALUMNUS”

*This was going to be a tough case.*

*“Find out all you can about Lt. Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police,” the editor said. “They say he’s an ASU graduate, but nobody remembers him ever having been here. He’s becoming a pretty popular figure, though, and I wanna know why.”*

*We’d worked together before, this editor and me. I’d get the usual fee, minus expenses.*

*I poured myself a cup of joe and reviewed what I knew about this Leaphorn character. A Navajo. Studied anthropology.*

*Damn good cop. Still trying to get over the death of his wife.*


*Oh, and he’s all in the mind of some guy named Hillerman.*

**B**y all accounts, Joe Leaphorn earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from ASU. But you won’t find his name anywhere in the official records. The fictional Navajo Tribal policeman’s degrees are recorded solely in the books of author Tony Hillerman.

Degrees or not, Leaphorn has brought his creator a growing following of faithful readers who delight in the thoughtful puzzle-solving practices of the taciturn lieutenant and his maverick co-star, Patrolman Jim Chee.

In the real world, Leaphorn is known far





beyond the boundaries of the reservation. Two of Hillerman's novels, "Talking God" and "A Thief of Time," have hit the best-seller lists. His newest, "Coyote Waits," seems destined to do the same.

"Leaphorn, your alum, is going to be published in Icelandic," Hillerman notes. In fact, Leaphorn's adventures have been published in 11 languages so far, in "everything from Japanese to Portugese."

The author has borrowed more than Leaphorn's degree from ASU. He adapted the title "A Thief of Time," duly acknowledged, from a documentary about vandals who prey on Southwestern archaeological sites. The documentary, called "Thieves of Time," was produced in 1979 by KAET/Channel 8, the ASU-based PBS television station.

ASU pops up here and there throughout Hillerman's books. Leaphorn met his wife at ASU, earned 12 credits in Spanish and took mathematics when he was a junior.

Most often encountered, though, are references to Leaphorn's education in anthropology. So it's not surprising that ASU's Anthropology Department has embraced Leaphorn as one of its own.

"Leaphorn Withdraws Resignation" trumpeted the headline on the Oct. 11, 1988, edition of the Anthropology Department's newsletter.

"After a long and productive career, and upset following the death of his wife, Emma, Lt. Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police decided to resign from the force," the article read.

That's what happened in "A Thief of Time."

"The book describes Leaphorn's most recent case, in which he attempts to find a missing archaeologist and identify the killer or killers of several pothunters in the process," the article added.

There's more.

"The many readers of Hillerman's mysteries will be pleased to learn that upon conclusion of the case, Joe Leaphorn decides to withdraw his resignation, choosing instead to continue using his cunning, his bravery and his ASU-earned anthropological expertise to make life unpleasant for any criminals roaming the Navajo Nation."

Anthropology Professor Charles Merbs, who edits the newsletter, enjoys "watch-

ing" Leaphorn work, as do other physical anthropologists. Merbs has a colleague in England who is a big Hillerman fan.

"She just loves it when I send her my Hillerman books."

*I'd learned as much as I could from the anthropology guys, but there were other leads to follow. Other sources who could give me some explanations.*

*I had a few ideas. It was time to check them out.*

Hillerman's portrayal of Indians is a bit out of the ordinary, according to Gretchen Bataille.

"I think readers may find it unusual to see Indians as heroes," says Bataille, chairwoman of ASU's English department and a specialist in Native American literature. "Readers expect the savage Plains Indians of Hollywood or the noble savages of James Fenimore Cooper."

She assesses Hillerman's, and thus Leaphorn's, success.

"He does write well, and he doesn't stereotype the Indians he writes about. The Indian characters only add more to the mystery."

One of Bataille's students, Betsy Redman, compiled a file on Hillerman for a research paper. She compares the work of Hillerman, who is of German descent, with a book written by Anna Lee Walters, a Native American.

While there are many striking similarities between the work of the two authors, Redman points out an important difference.

"Tony Hillerman writes a classic detective novel," Redman says. "A crime is committed, the cops are called in, they snoop around. In the end, everything is neatly resolved."

Walters doesn't do that. All the central characters come together at the end of her book, but the final scene provides no answers.

"As an Anglo reader, I was expecting some sort of resolution," Redman says. "She writes from a Native American point of view, where mystery is an expected part of life. We don't like mysteries. We like rational explanations.

"I think Leaphorn works well for an

Anglo audience because he is very much Anglicized. He does more traditional detective work as we see it."

Leaphorn has found a big fan in Karen Swisher, a Sioux from the Standing Rock Reservation of the Dakotas and director of ASU's Center for Indian Education. While you might assume she would be more likely to find fault with an Anglicized Native American hero, the opposite is true.

"I've read them all. I'm on my second round."

Why?

"I think Joe Leaphorn became a real person for me," Swisher says. "He's cautious. He's thoughtful. He's wise. I like the way he looks holistically at things and puts the pieces together."

According to John Lincoln, a Navajo who is director of ASU's Project Prime, Hillerman's portrayal of Navajos is pretty accurate.

The Navajo imprint on Leaphorn despite his creator's non-Indian background is undeniable, although the fictional cop does reject his tribe's traditional beliefs in witchcraft. And while many Navajos enjoy Hillerman's work, many others don't because it often deals with those witchcraft beliefs. Traditional Navajos find that disturbing.

"Those are the kinds of things Navajos don't ever talk about in public," Lincoln says.

*I considered this last bit of information. Turned it over in my mind. But I still didn't have everything I needed.*

*It was time to grill Hillerman. He made up this Leaphorn character. Hillerman would give me some answers.*

So how is it that an unpretentious man who grew up on an Oklahoma farm developed such an interest in Navajo culture?

Working as a truck driver after World War II, Hillerman stopped one day on the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. The tribe happened to be performing the "Enemy Way" curing ceremony for its combat veterans, and Hillerman has been hooked ever since.

Later, working as editor of the Santa Fe

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Steve Koppes is assistant director of the ASU News Bureau.



*New Mexican*, he covered the shooting death of a Jicarilla Apache police officer. The officer, wounded in his shooting arm, still had been able to return the fire with his good hand.

The officer's coolness under fire lives on in the character of Joe Leaphorn.

Leaphorn enrolled at ASU, Hillerman says, because "It's the handiest university with a big anthropology department close to the reservation."

"Tucson is sort of the tea-sipper school," the author jokes, adding that ASU seemed more suited to the blue-collar tastes of Leaphorn, who lives in Window Rock and drives a pickup truck.

After "bailing out of the newspaper business," Hillerman spent 20 years as a journalism professor at the University of New Mexico.

He knows a lot of academics and that, plus their tendency to do research on the reservation, is why so many of them show up in his novels.

"They make suitable bad guys."

*I remembered that in "Coyote Waits," Leaphorn talks about "a professor who was either weirdly absent-minded or over-the-hill into senility." Mentally, I rounded up the usual suspects.*

*But that's another story. I still needed more dope on Leaphorn. I pushed Hillerman for details.*

Hillerman says that as a student, Leaphorn was "one of those guys you'd find a lot in the library." He studied anthropology because he had "this hometown chauvinistic interest in understanding his own people."

Was Leaphorn ever anything other than a cop?

"Apparently he had a brief career in the military," the author says.

Throughout the last three books, Leaphorn is tormented by the memory of his late wife. But in "Coyote Waits," he asks a female Northern Arizona University professor to travel with him to China.

So, will Leaphorn remarry?

"I don't have the slightest idea," Hillerman says. "My options are wide open."

Leaphorn's resignation came up three books ago. Meanwhile, Officer Chee has shown an aptitude for detective work. Will Leaphorn retire soon, leaving Chee to take over?

"I've got another novel that's bumping around in my head," Hillerman says. "I'm waiting for the inspiration and time."

In the next book, Hillerman reveals, Leaphorn probably will show Chee the ropes of criminal investigation.

But the Hillerman faithful may have to wait awhile before Leaphorn cracks another case. The author is collaborating on a non-fiction book titled "Hillerman Country" with his brother, Barney, a photographer. The book is scheduled to be published in October.

Hillerman also wants to assemble a historical anthology of the West, and there are other things he wants to do as well.

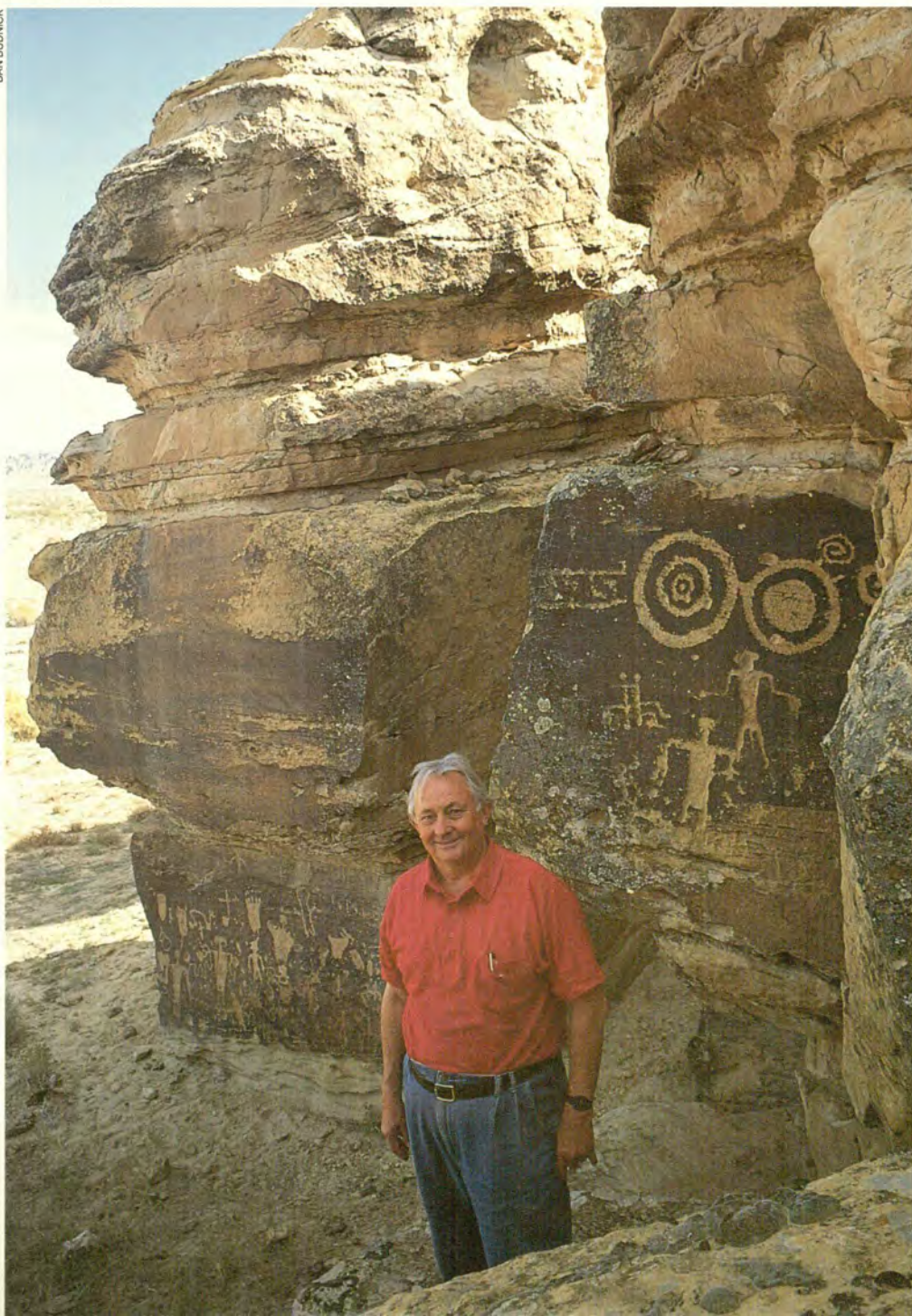
"Some of them might be more fun than writing." □

*Finally, the reasons behind Leaphorn's success became clear. All the clues pointed in one direction — toward Albuquerque and a man with a passion for Southwest Indian cultures.*

*I was about to close the file on the case when Hillerman dished up one last insight into Joe Leaphorn.*

*"It's my fair opinion that he had a hell of a good experience at ASU."* □

DAN BUDNICK



**The fictional Lt. Leaphorn is the product of author Tony Hillerman's fascination with the Southwest and Native American culture.**