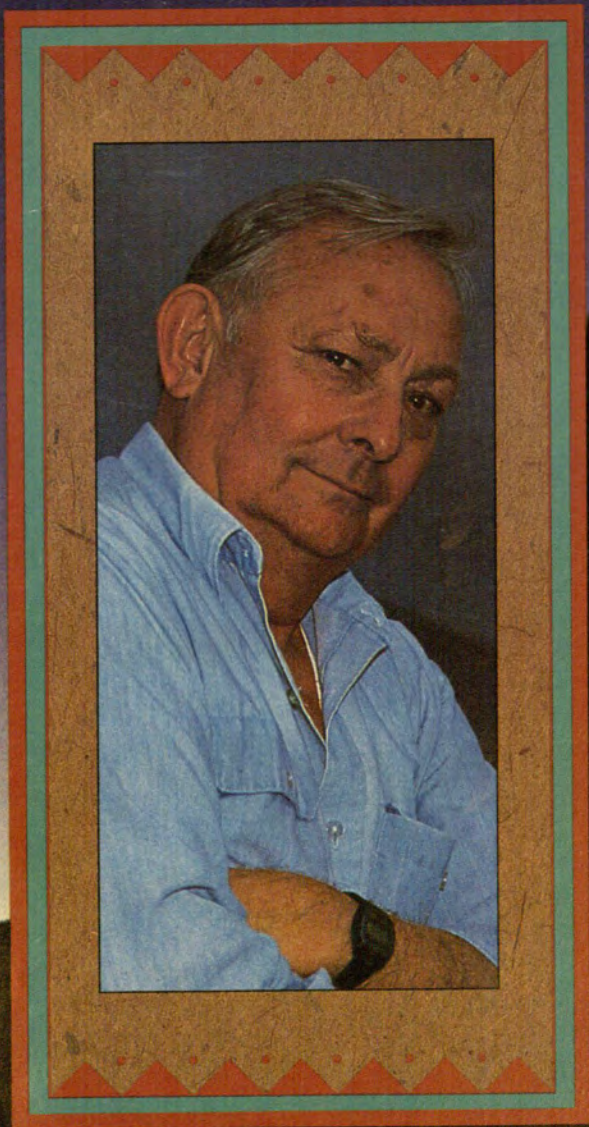


ST. ANTHONY

MESSENGER

PRICE \$1.75

JUNE 1991



TONY HILLERMAN:

*Best-selling Author
of Navajo Mystery Stories*

FIGHTING RACIAL FEARS IN CHICAGO

**WHY WE NEED A SPIRITUALITY
OF AGING**

I LOVE YOU ANYWAY, DAD

**COUPLE'S 'HEART-TALK'
BREAKS PHYSICAL BARRIERS**

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VOL. 99/NO. 1

From the Editor

Understanding Each Other

Tony Hillerman is more than an award-winning author of Navajo mystery novels, relates Assistant Editor Catherine Walsh. He is a "reverse missionary" helping other people understand the ways and beliefs of Native Americans.

It wasn't easy for Jim and Mary Lou Beers to reestablish communication and understanding after a stroke left Jim paralyzed and speechless. But today, discloses Marianne Slattery, they teach families and engaged couples what it means to communicate heart to heart.

Julie Sly explains the need of those growing older for self-understanding and a spirituality of aging.

Southwest Chicago, relates Jay Copp, has had a reputation for racial intolerance. To create better understanding among races and successfully achieve neighborhood integration, 17 Catholic institutions are participating in the Southwest Cluster Project.

For many of us, understanding our parents comes only with time. Gina Isaac (pen name) confides how time has enabled her to tell her alcoholic father, "I love you anyway, Dad."

Karen Jessen's short-story partners find insight and better understanding with the help of a sightless dog.

Peace and all good!

COVER STORY



28

TONY HILLERMAN: BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF NAVAJO MYSTERY STORIES

His detective heroes are a pair of Navajo tribal policemen. Robert Redford is turning Tony Hillerman's mystery novels into movies. A committed Catholic, Hillerman says he has been influenced by the spiritual values of Navajos and other Native Americans.
By Catherine Walsh

FEATURES

10

COMMUNICATING HEART TO HEART: JIM AND MARY LOU BEERS

By Marianne Slattery

16

WHY WE NEED A SPIRITUALITY OF AGING

By Julie Sly

22

'HERE COMES THE NEIGHBORHOOD': CHICAGO CATHOLICS BUILD RACIAL HARMONY

By Jay Copp

36

I LOVE YOU ANYWAY, DAD

By Gina Isaac

40

FICTION: PARTNERS

By Karen Jessen

DEPARTMENTS

LETTERS 2

MOVIES/TV 4

NEWS AND VIEWS FOR BUSY CHRISTIANS 6

FOLLOWERS OF FRANCIS AND ANTHONY 8
Cynthia Loudon, S.F.O.

POETRY 15

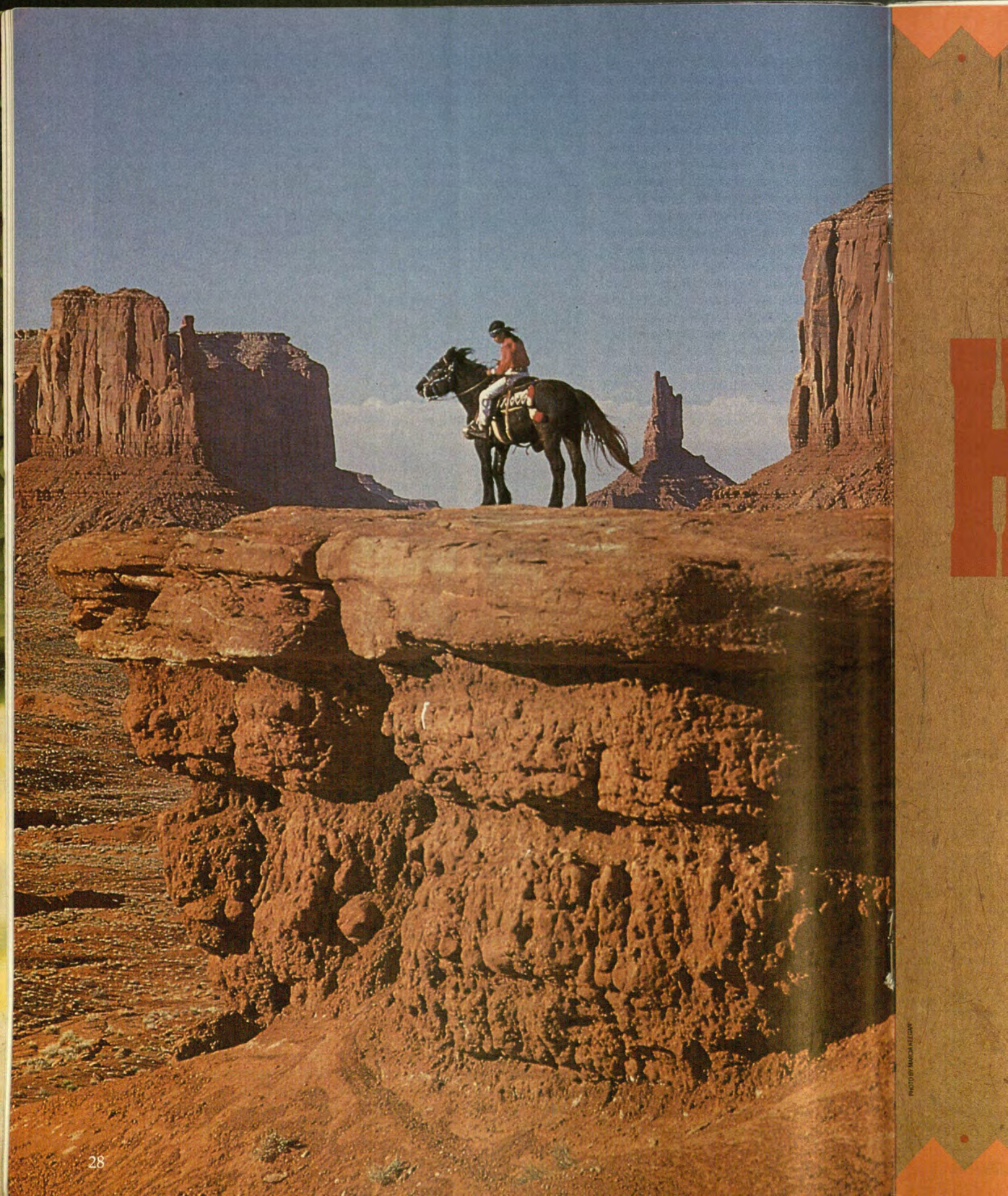
EDITORIAL 45
What's an Editor to Do?

THE WISE MAN ANSWERS 46
If St. Francis Didn't Write the Peace Prayer, Who Did?

BOOKS 49
The Spiritual Life of Children

BETWEEN YOUTH AND ME 54
Holograms and the Body of Christ

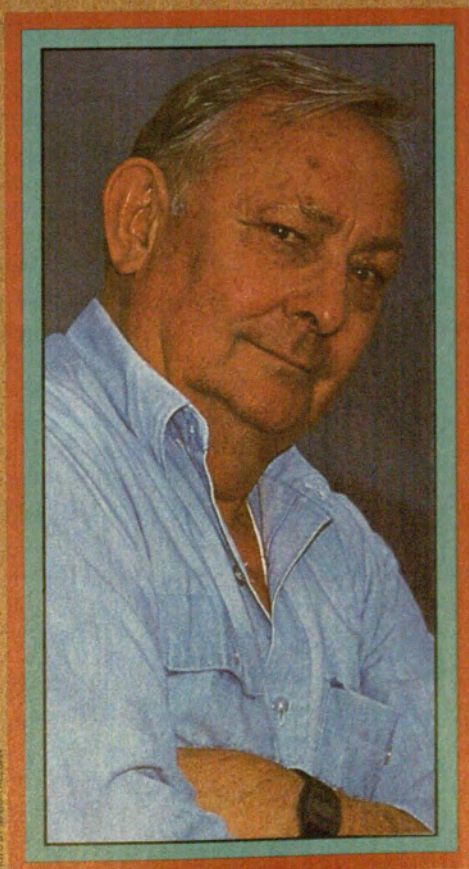
LAUGHING MATTER 56



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PHOTO BY MARCIA FEELEY

TONY HILLERMAN




Best-selling Author of Navajo Mystery Stories

His detective heroes are a pair of Navajo tribal policemen. Robert Redford is turning Tony Hillerman's mystery novels into movies. A committed Catholic, Hillerman says he has been influenced by the spiritual values of Navajos and other Native Americans. By Catherine Walsh, color photos by Marcia Keegan

PHOTO BY MARCIA KEEGAN

PHOTO BY MARCIA KEEGAN



WHEN SOME NAVAJOS meet Tony Hillerman for the first time, they are surprised to discover he is white. Upon reading his best-selling mystery novels featuring Navajos as protagonists, they had assumed he belonged to the *Dineh*—a Navajo term meaning “The People.” “I don’t do many book signings anymore, but when Navajos come up to me at these events and say, ‘I thought you were a Navajo,’ I like that,” says Hillerman.

Perched prominently on a bookcase in Hillerman’s home is a wooden plaque calling the author a “special friend” of the *Dineh*. The Navajo Nation gave Hillerman the award in 1987 “...for authentically portraying the strength and dignity of traditional Navajo culture.” Hillerman, who considers himself a “reverse missionary” to non-Indian America, says the award came as a complete surprise to him. “They called me down to the middle of the rodeo grounds and presented it to me,” he says. “I was very touched because it expresses what I’ve been trying to do in my books all these years.”

For more than 20 years now, Tony Hillerman has been writing mystery novels involving two fictional, university-educated Navajo tribal policemen: the older, more assimilated Joe Leaphorn, and Jim Chee, a young Navajo who is also studying to be a medicine man or *shaman*. There are 10 books in the series so far. The last four—*Coyote Waits*, *Talking God*, *A Thief of Time* and *Skinwalkers*—made *The New York Times* best-seller list. The books are also published in 14 foreign languages. A couple of years ago, actor and producer Robert Redford bought the movie options on Hillerman’s books. He is currently filming *The Dark Wind*—based on a mystery of the same title—with Hillerman serving as an adviser. The movie is due to be released in the fall.

Deep Admiration for Navajo Culture

St. Anthony Messenger interviewed Tony Hillerman at his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on a sunny spring morning. A large, friendly man, Hillerman says he chose to write about the Navajos “because I deeply admire their culture.” He relaxes behind his office desk and tells a favorite story that accounts in part for that admiration.

“A Navajo I know wanted very badly to be a surveyor,” Hillerman recalls. “He wanted to work outdoors and he liked math. So he got a job with a company where he was running the surveying group on a power line. Now one of his relatives had been recently killed in a car accident. Then another relative died. And the word comes to this fellow that a *sing*, a curing ceremony, is going to be held for some member of the family to get him back in harmony after all this tragedy. So he goes to his boss and says, ‘I’ve got to go to this curing ceremony

“It is taken for granted among traditional Navajos that if you have a lot of money you're not a good person. Because, if you're a Navajo, you've got poor relatives. You should be sharing.”

PHOTO BY MARCIA KEEGAN

and it takes eight days.' The boss says, 'Look, we've got a contract. We're behind. And you've been with us less than six months; you don't have any time off coming yet.' So this Navajo has got a value judgment to make. And he makes it in the Navajo Way. *Family comes first*. He goes to the curing ceremony and he loses his job. Almost any Navajo would make the same decision."

Another Navajo friend of Hillerman's has a brother who is a "hot-shot" bronco rider in rodeos. "He had won several ribbons at one point," says Hillerman. "But my friend told me that his brother Joe was going to lose some rodeo contests because he thought he had been winning too much."

To win too much at the expense of others, to have a lot of money and material goods when people around you are without, puts one "out of harmony" in the Navajo culture, explains Hillerman. "It is taken for granted



PHOTO BY CATHERINE WALSH

A "special friend" of the Navajos, as designated by the award behind him, Hillerman recently received the Mystery Writers of America's Grand Master of Crime Fiction prize.

among traditional Navajos that if you have a lot of money you're not a good person," he says. "Because, if you're a Navajo, you've got poor relatives. It goes without saying that you shouldn't have so much because you should be sharing."

To Hillerman, a lifelong practicing Catholic, the Navajo philosophy of sharing goods in common sounds "dangerously Christian"—not Christianity as it is often practiced in the United States in 1991, he says, but Christianity as it was meant to be lived. The religious beliefs of the Navajos and other Southwestern Indian tribes like the Hopi are in many ways different from Christian beliefs. But Hillerman says he is deeply influenced by those Native Americans he knows who follow their traditional religions. "When you're around Navajos and Hopis whose lives are very much affected by a belief in God, a faith, then you can't help but be affected by that and made a little bit better yourself," he says.

In an interview with National Public Radio last year, Hillerman said he considered himself to be a "reverse missionary" to non-Indian America through his mystery novels. America, he tells *St. Anthony Messenger*, has become "a pagan, materialistic society" and could learn much from the Navajos and other Native Americans. Yet Hillerman doesn't preach in his books. He entertains

readers by weaving complex thrillers in which Navajo policemen use their wits and traditional ways to battle evil in a modern world.

Navajo Way and Franciscans vs. Crime

Lt. Joe Leaphorn is "sort of our supercop," says Hillerman character Jim Chee, the young officer with whom Leaphorn eventually teams up, in *Coyote Waits*. "Old as the hills. Knows everybody. Remembers everything. Forgets nothing." Leaphorn works alone in Hillerman's first three novels. In *The Blessing Way*, he pursues a Navajo who is posing as a witch in order to carry out a massive, military intelligence-connected crime. After a young Navajo man is killed by this "witch," Leaphorn tries to make sense of the murder in the Navajo Way:

Why? Why did Navajos kill? Not as lightly as white men, because the Navajo Way made life the ultimate value and death unrelieved terror. Usually the motive for homicide on the Reservation was simple. Anger, or fear, or a mixture of both. Or a mixture of one with alcohol. Navajos did not kill with cold-blooded premeditation. Nor did they kill for profit. To do so violated the scale of values of The People....Where, then, was the motive? There was something about all this that was strangely un-Navajo.

Franciscan friars have worked with Native Americans in the Southwest for the last 400 years. And Franciscan characters figure prominently in two Leaphorn mysteries, *Dance Hall of the Dead* and *Listening Woman*. In the former novel, a fictional Franciscan friar at the Zuni Indian mission, Father Ingles, helps Leaphorn search for a missing Navajo boy—"the kind of boy if you can make a Christian out of him will make you a saint." Twin Navajo brothers in *Listening Woman* go separate ways—one becomes a Franciscan priest and the other an Indian-rights militant and criminal. The brothers end up confronting each other, much like the mythological Hero Twins who represent human intelligence and aggressiveness in the Navajo origin story, their Book of Genesis.

"I'm very proud of the Franciscans in the Southwest," says Hillerman. "I'm made very cheerful by going to places like the Zuni Mission. They know how to save souls there—by respect." The mission church at Zuni is famous for its paintings of *kachinas* (deified ancestral spirits that personify different animals), a project that was supported by the Franciscans. Hillerman points to a poster of the Navajo alphabet in his office and says that the friars are responsible for the Navajo written language.

Hillerman's novels are popular with Franciscans. Father Gilbert Schneider, O.F.M., who serves as provincial for Our Lady of Guadalupe province in the Southwest, has corresponded with Hillerman and highly respects him. "Tony Hillerman has given me great insight into Navajo metaphysics," says Father Schneider. "He has helped me to see the process of evangelization among the Navajos more clearly. And he has also been very

generous in supporting the work of the friars."

'Walking in Beauty' in Navajoland

After several books involving Lt. Leaphorn, Hillerman introduced Officer Jim Chee in *People of Darkness*. In contrast to Leaphorn, who is skeptical about witchcraft and more assimilated to ways of the white world, Chee is a romantic. His efforts to be both tribal policeman and traditional medicine man are like a Roman Catholic priest trying to serve also as a bank executive, Leaphorn thinks early in their relationship. Marilyn Stasio, who writes a crime column for *The New York Times Book Review*, has called Chee "a mystic and the Christ figure of the series."

In *People of Darkness*, young Chee proves his mettle by facing off with a sociopathic hired gun and falls in love with Mary Landon, a white schoolteacher on the reservation. In *The Dark Wind*, he stumbles into a drug war. A pilot and his passenger are killed while flying cocaine into a remote section of Navajo-Hopi country, and it soon becomes apparent that the plane crash was not accidental. As a policeman, Chee can aid the pilot's sister

in finding out who was responsible for the crash. But as a Navajo raised in the traditional way, he is culturally helpless to deal with her desire for revenge.

Someone who violated basic rules of behavior and harmed you was, by Navajo definition, "out of control." The "dark wind" had entered him and destroyed his judgment. One avoided such persons, and worried about them, and was pleased if they were cured of this temporary insanity and returned again to hozro. But to Chee's Navajo mind, the idea of punishing them would be as insane as the original act.

The Navajo goal of hozro, of "walking in beauty" and being in harmony with all creation, permeates Hillerman's novels. After confronting the killer in *People of Darkness*, Chee decides to ask his uncle—who is a shaman and is training Chee to become one—to perform an "Enemy Way" ceremony to heal him from his encounter with evil, to allow him to "go again with beauty all around him." In *Dance Hall of the Dead*, Leaphorn reflects on the Navajo Way taught to him by his grandfather: "that the only goal for man was beauty, and that beauty was found only in harmony, and that this harmony of nature was a matter of dazzling complexity."

A SPECIAL FRIEND OF NAT

Tony Hillerman seems to take more pleasure in knowing that his books are read and loved by Native American schoolkids than by the fact that they are nationwide best-sellers.

He laughingly recalls a Navajo student who once told him: "Mr. Hillerman, I have to read your books or drop out of school!" One of his "proudest awards" was when an Indian woman librarian told him that "kids, especially boys, read your books and say, 'Yeah, this is us and we win in them!'"

Although he doesn't speak at schools as much as he would like to, Hillerman has a basic message for Indian youth. "I like to point out to them that their own life is raw material for writing, for fiction—which never dawned on me when I was growing up in a very similar kind of circumstances, poor, rural and isolated." He also emphasizes to the kids that "they can do anything they want to do, as long as they get an education." A week doesn't go by, says Hillerman, when he doesn't get a fan letter from a Native American youngster.

Students at St. Catherine's Indian School in Santa Fe, New Mexico, are among Tony Hillerman's young fans. Before and after roller-skating in the



These boys at St. Catherine's Indian School in Santa Fe, New Mexico, avidly read Tony Hillerman's mysteries.

school's gymnasium on a recent Saturday night, a group of them shared their reasons for liking Hillerman mysteries. They mentioned, among other things, being pleased with the author's portrayal of a fictional St. Catherine's student in *The Ghostway*

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The vast, desolate beauty of the Southwest permeates Hillerman's books as well. "The sense of place in my novels is very important; it's almost another character. It affects the plot in every book almost without exception," Hillerman tells *St. Anthony Messenger*. Readers quickly become familiar with a sacred land not their own: the redrock canyons, arid deserts and moonlit mesas of the 25,000-square-mile Navajo Reservation sprawled across New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. The author makes it a point to learn well the locations he uses. "Spots I want to write about I really need to memorize sensually," he told *The American West*, "in terms of lights and shadows, the way things smell, feel and look. Then when I am really comfortable with a place I can write about it."

No Money, Sex or Violence in Novels

In *Skinwalkers* and later novels, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee forge a wary alliance. Hillerman's recent books delve more into each character's personal life than did his earlier novels. The tensions in Chee's cross-cultural romance are explored, as is his growing friendship with Janet Pete, a Stanford University-educated Navajo

lawyer. The reader vividly experiences Leaphorn's grief for his recently deceased wife, Emma, and sees the solace he finds in a friendship with Professor Louisa Bourebonette, a white woman.

"I get quite a few letters from readers who hated it when Emma died," says Hillerman. Her death from a brain tumor actually came about in the author's imagination quite by accident. "I was trying to figure out how to motivate Leaphorn to do what I needed him to do in *A Thief of Time*, which was go off on a wild-goose chase looking for a missing anthropologist. I suddenly saw that as a widower, grieving, Leaphorn would do this because he could picture Emma saying, 'Go find her.' Emma alive would not have said it."

One of the challenges in his next novel, says the author, will be to develop the friendship between Leaphorn and Professor Bourebonette. "Here are two people, both mature, both intelligent, who have a lot of intellectual interests and things in common," says Hillerman. "Now most of his adult life Leaphorn was married to Emma, a woman he dearly loved but whose interests centered around family. Then he meets Pro-

OF NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH

who courageously saves Officer Jim Chee's life and her own.

Marklyn Chee, 18, is a Navajo from Chinle, Arizona. "Hillerman's descriptions of everyday Indian life are accurate and all the places he writes about are very familiar," he says. "I like the way Jim Chee's character uses the Navajo Way to solve modern problems. Hillerman emphasizes in his books that to become someone, to make a name for yourself,

you have to know where you came from, you have to know your culture. That encourages me personally."

Nolan D. Esquibel, 15, hails from San Felipe Pueblo in Algodones, New Mexico. He believes "more Indians should read Hillerman's books so they can understand how other tribes live, instead of mocking them."

"Young people learn a lot from his books. They give us questions to ask our parents and grandpar-



Sha Marie Delgarito and Marci Platero also like Hillerman.

ents about the Navajo Way," says Marci Platero, 18, a Navajo from Crownpoint, New Mexico. "Some of our parents don't know some of our ceremonies because they are modernized. But Hillerman's books show us how to get back to the old way; they show us how to live."

Marci's first cousin, Sha Marie Delgarito, 14, comments: "When you say 'reservation,' many people think of Navajos

as drunk and stupid in Gallup [a city adjacent to Navajoland in New Mexico.] But Hillerman's books show that Navajos are respectable and have dignity. When you read his books, you are proud to be a Navajo."

Kurt Begay, 18, a Navajo also from Chinle, says that Hillerman's books "have powerful spiritual meaning behind them. They help me to respect my Indian culture and to become an all-round better person."



PHOTO BY CATHERINE WALSH

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fessor Bourebonette—a woman who shares his interests in cultural roots, mythology, where ideas come from—someone he sees as a companion. And he's a lonely man. Bourebonette appeals to him, but he doesn't want to open up an emotional can of worms. Now how can he tell her that? How is he going to find out that maybe she feels the same way? That two people can love each other without having sex enter the scene. That's going to be hard to write. I'm not sure I can do it. There's a lot of things I want to do in books that don't get done because I'm not a good enough writer to do it."

While Hillerman may have occasional doubts about his ability as a writer, the critical acclaim and awards he has received should keep them in perspective. "Hillerman deserves to be included in any list of the best living mystery writers," the *Dallas Morning News* proclaimed. "[He] transcends the mystery genre," stated *The Washington Post Book World*. "Whatever your pleasure, you can't go wrong with this gifted, skillful and...unique writer," according to the *San Diego Union*. A past president of the Mystery Writers of America, Hillerman has been given their Edgar Allan Poe Award and Grand Master of Crime Fiction prize. He has also received the Silver Spur Award for best novel set in the West.

Commenting on the fact that his novels are virtually free of money, sex and violence, Hillerman says that all Harper & Row, his publisher, expects him to do is "tell a good story." He says he is "turned off by people who pander to cruelty" and refuses to do it in his books. As for sex, "there are plenty of guys and gals turning it out by the thousands of pages," says Hillerman. "I don't think people particularly buy my books to read that. They certainly haven't been led to believe they are going to get it."

The "exoticness" of Hillerman's first novel, *The Blessing Way*, led a New York agent to reject it out-of-hand. "If you insist on rewriting this, get rid of all that Indian stuff," she said. But Hillerman refused and in 1970 the novel was published by Harper & Row. Today, Hillerman has a contract worth over a million dollars and is one of the publishing company's best-selling authors.

Growing Up With Native Americans

For Tony Hillerman, Native Americans were never exotic people. As a boy, the Indians were his neighbors and classmates—poor and rural just like him. Hillerman grew up in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, on a farm without electricity or running water. He and a few other boys were allowed to attend St. Mary's Academy, a school for Indian girls run by the Sisters of Mercy. "The nuns forgave us for not being Potawatomes," he told *The New York Times*, "but they never forgave us for not being girls."

Hillerman fought in World War II in Europe, where he sustained severe injuries and earned a Silver Star. Home on medical leave in 1945, he had an encounter with Navajo Indians that changed his life. While driving oilfield equipment from Oklahoma City to Crownpoint, New Mexico, in a new job, he came across a group of Navajos on horseback. Wearing elaborate face paint and feathers, they were holding an "Enemy Way" ceremony for newly returned war veterans—cleansing them of all traces of the foe. Fascinated by the "living culture" of the

Navajos and by the beauty of the land, Hillerman became determined to move to New Mexico. A few years after obtaining a degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma, he did just that with his wife Marie. The Hillermans raised six children in Albuquerque, five of whom they adopted. Today, they are proud grandparents of 10.

After a 15-year career in journalism that included working for United Press International and serving as editor-in-chief of the Santa Fe *New Mexican*, Hillerman began to pursue other kinds of writing. While teaching at the University of New Mexico—where he picked up an M.A. in English literature—he wrote such books as *The Spell of New Mexico*, a *Fodor* guide to New Mexico, and *Rio Grande*. He was then ready to try his hand at fiction. Influenced by mystery writer Raymond Chandler and Catholic writers Graham Greene and G. K. Chesterton, Hillerman decided the mystery genre would be his format and the Navajos his subject.

Shunning Materialism, Following Dreams

Jack Weatherford, an anthropologist at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and author of the book *Indian Givers*, which details Native American contributions to the modern world, is a Hillerman fan. "Hillerman's books are so captivating that, no matter where you are, he pulls you into his world," he tells *St. Anthony Messenger*. "Hillerman really is a bridge between cultures and that, I think, is part of his genius. When we read his books, we're being entertained and we're enjoying it. We don't think of it as learning or studying, but he is actually teaching us more about another culture than anthropologists ever do in a lifetime."

Followers of Hillerman's books include Bishop Donald E. Pelotte, a Native American who is bishop of Gallup, New Mexico, and Episcopal Bishop Steven T. Plummer, a Navajo. Bishop Pelotte was surprised and pleased when Hillerman "mentioned me in *Talking God*," and Bishop Plummer says that "Navajos are more recognized across the country because of his books."

Perhaps the only visible sign of Hillerman's success as an author is his new, gray adobe-style home in Albuquerque. Yet he wonders at times if his spacious home—built in a rural area with a magnificent view of New Mexico's Sandia Mountains—goes against his values. "I'm a good Catholic and a good Christian in the sense that I deeply believe. But I'm better talking about it than doing it," says Hillerman. "For example, I don't need this big house. It's comfortable and we love it. But downtown in Albuquerque, there's a lot of people who are homeless."

Hillerman refuses to ease his conscience with the fact that he gives generously to charity. He also refuses to elaborate on this part of his life, saying that he follows the gospel injunction of giving quietly, "without eight guys going before you blowing on trumpets." He says his wife, Marie, who has taught catechism at Assumption Parish in Albuquerque for many years, "is a much better Christian than I am."

Despite his newfound wealth, Hillerman has drawn the line so far at buying a Jaguar automobile. "All my life I've always admired the Jaguar, but I cannot bring myself to buy one. It just seems obscene. It symbolizes conspicuous consumption, unfortunately." He likes to

quote the late Louisiana populist politician Earl Long who once said that "putting me in a Jaguar would be like putting socks on a rooster."

Hillerman feels strongly that "you simply *cannot* defend a materialistic society. You can't find the material to defend it in the Gospel." If he were ever Pope, he says, he would "hold the world's biggest garage sale" and sell off all the Vatican's treasures. He would also "dismiss the College of Cardinals and thank them for the fine job they've done." He would then "appoint new cardinals who had worked directly with the poor, including a few women like Mother Teresa."

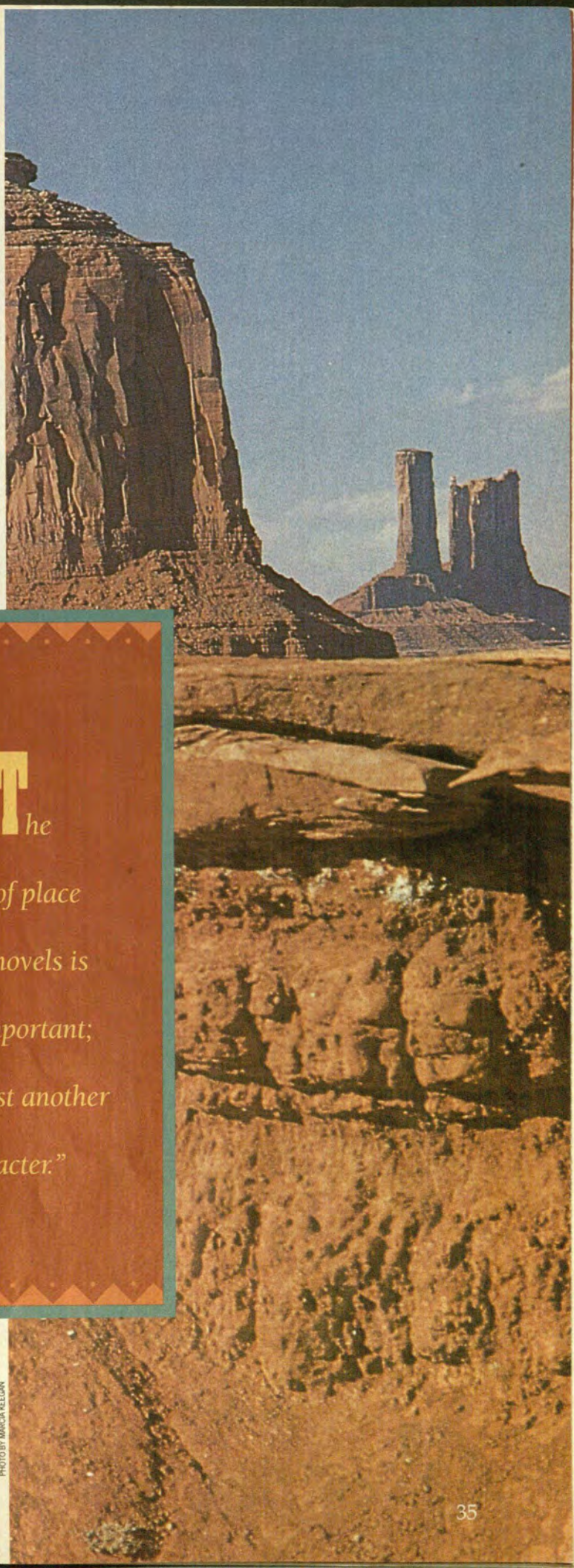
Hillerman learned to shun material wealth and to follow his dreams from his older brother, Barney. "I was lucky in having a brother who is unusually wise," says Hillerman. "Our dad died when we were teenagers and Barney and I were very close. I remember telling him one day about my ambitions—that I was going to be successful and make a lot of money and get off this damn farm. He asked what good is money when you've got your rent paid and you've got food and clothing. Beyond that, he said, what can you buy with it?"

Barney's point was that the only thing good about having money is "that you can ransom yourself back from the system," continues Hillerman. "What you've got to do, he said, is find a way to get your basic needs met doing something you like to do, so you don't *have* to buy your time back and thus don't have to have a lot of money."

Tony Hillerman found writing and learned to be frugal. He and Marie still "clip the 15-cent coupon on the margarine," says the author. "You don't change the habits you've formed over a lifetime." Tony is still close to his brother Barney, who followed his dreams by abandoning a career in geology for one in photography. His company employs "paroled armed robbers" and others in need of a job and a new start in life. The two Hillerman brothers have collaborated on a book about the Southwest entitled *Hillermans' Country* which will be published soon. Tony is also at work on an anthology called *The Best of the West*.

Sometime in the next year, Tony Hillerman's newest mystery will be written and published. In it, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee will work more closely together as Leaphorn prepares to retire. Though the senior Navajo policeman may eventually step down, fans of Tony Hillerman can rest easy and, from their armchairs, continue their journey through Navajoland. The author at 65 has no plans of retiring anytime soon. ■

Catherine Walsh is an assistant editor of this publication. Marcia Keegan, whose color photographs appear in this article, is the author of *Enduring Culture: A Century of Photography of the Southwest Indians*. (Clear Light Publishers, \$29.95).



“**T**he sense of place in my novels is very important; it's almost another character.”

PHOTO BY MARCIA KEEGAN