



Modern Maturity

July–August 1995



CRIME PAYS

Mystery writers Tony Hillerman and Sue Grafton

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Modern Maturity

AARP focus
on Social Security

Volume 38 Number 4
July–August 1995



ANDY LEVIN

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In our MM Interview the masters of the mystery compare notes on howtheydunit. INTERVIEW BY SUSAN GOODMAN

SUE GRAFTON

BY SUSAN GOODMAN

By 9 A.M. Sue Grafton has finished her three-mile run and is sitting in front of her computer. Tony Hillerman is shuffling the cards for his first game of solitaire. When cursed with writer's block Hillerman drives to the nearby Navajo reservation, seeking solace and inspiration in the New Mexico landscape. "I'm a city girl," Grafton proclaims. "Nature seems hostile. You go out there and things are eating other things."

Both took circuitous routes to their lives of fictional crime. Grafton spent time as a medical secretary, mainstream novelist and screenwriter before heroine Kinsey Millhone's first caper. Hillerman, creator of Navajo cops Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, worked as a newspaper reporter and journalism professor, although he swears his hardest writing job was his first—an advertising gig where he had to come up with three radio spots daily for Purina Pig Chow.

We asked writer Susan Goodman to talk about writing and mysteries with these two masters of the genre. Goodman reports: "What a pleasure when celebrity doesn't translate into attitude. Hillerman graciously offered to host the interview at his home in Albuquerque, and Grafton just as graciously agreed to fly in from Santa Barbara, California. They both worked to make the discussion easy and fun. Coffee and cake were served along with good-natured clowning during the obligatory photo session.

"With the Sandia Mountains—often Hillerman's inspiration—as the backdrop, we finally sat down, let the tape recorder run and sipped chardonnay, which, as any Kinsey Millhone fan knows, is the most consistent thing on her menu besides peanut-butter-and-pickle sandwiches."

ARE YOU READING
A WHODUNIT? IT'S
NO MYSTERY WHO
LIKELY WROTE IT:
CHECK OUT THESE
USUAL SUSPECTS

Modern Maturity: How did each of you start writing mysteries?

Tony Hillerman: I wasn't going to be a mystery writer. I wanted to be an "author." But I thought, A mystery is short; I'll see if I can go the distance with one, then write *War and Peace*.

Sue Grafton: I was screenwriting in Hollywood and not happy doing business in that town. They told me I knew how to do characters but not plot. In mystery novels, plot is paramount. I thought, I'm going to write a mystery and make you eat your words. And I did just that.

MM: Wasn't there another element of revenge in that first book?

Grafton: I was going through a divorce and this person—I always refer to him as "this person"—put me through three custody battles. In those days I wasn't as ballsy and didn't know how to fight. So I used to lie in bed just thinking how much nicer it would be if he were a dead person instead of a live one.

I should have remembered all the ways I came up with to kill him because I would have had plots for 15 books. But I finally came up with one involving poison, and I thought, Putting this in a book is like being a hit man—I can kill him off and get money for it. That was the basis for "*A*" *Is for Alibi*.

Now I always tell people, "Don't cross me. I know how to get even with you."

MM: Does it bother either of you that many people label

JIM MEHLUGH

TONY HILLERMAN

AFTON



JIM MATHUCH

RMAN

'A WRITER IS LIKE A BAG LADY COLLECTING STUFF'

mysteries lesser "genre fiction"?

Hillerman: When you sign a book, they apologize, "I don't normally read mysteries." Have you heard that a thousand times, Sue?

Grafton: As if it's some secret shame. I have to admit it bothers me when somebody asks, "When are you gonna write a *real* book?"

Hillerman: You'll get over that. When you get as old as I am, you're glad to write any book.

MM: Twisting plots seems to be the hardest part of mystery writing, yet I've read neither of you plans them out beforehand.

Hillerman: Common sense tells you to outline a plot. But I just can't do it. Anyway, all sorts of things occur that wouldn't if you followed a blueprint.

MM: Aren't you liable to write yourself into a corner without a blueprint?

Grafton: That's when the book gets good. When I was writing "*E*" *Is for Evidence* I was on Chapter 23 of 24 and didn't have the faintest idea how the book was going to end. I thought, I sure hope this book ends with a bang and not a whimper. And a little voice said, "Put a bomb in it, Grafton." So the book ends with a bombing. People who outline don't have nearly the fun we do.

Hillerman: I was trying to outline *The Dark Wind*. I needed this stupid cop out in an isolated place to observe something, but there was no reason for him to be there. When I'm stuck, my wife, Marie, always says, "Go out on the reservation." That's where I usually think through problems. While I was there, somebody vandalized a windmill. Suddenly my cop was out there trying to catch the guys who vandalized it. That subplot

turned out better than the plot.

A writer is like a bag lady going through life with a sack and pointed stick collecting stuff.

Grafton: It's the little remark, the odd thing you're barely paying attention to. Once I was doing research at a coroner's office and they mentioned they often have bodies around for years. I thought, A corpse—what an interesting place to hide something—and used that in "*C*" *Is for Corpse*.

Hillerman: It's serendipity. Some years ago I was at Mass and up comes a guy taking the collection—elderly, thin, distinguished, a Don Quixote-looking fellow. Later, in *Talking God*, I'm describing a body lying beside some railroad tracks and find myself describing this usher. Now I'm stuck with a certain kind of personality, and it changes the whole book. The corpse turns into an exiled South American political leader.

So many things happen by accident. In an early book Joe Leaphorn's on the radio and I'm trying to make it seem natural. To fill in conversation, the dispatcher says, "Emma asked me to remind you of a dental appointment." So now I'm stuck with a wife.

Grafton: You could delete that line, but you think, That's interesting, where will it go? Kinsey has the same problem with love interests. What do you do with the guy at the end of the book? He can get killed, but I hate to invent a good character just to dispose of him. If not, he has to leave her or she has to leave him. But why would he? Or she? So unless you can think of some way to get him offstage, it's better not to start.

MM: Why do you have to get rid of him at all?

Grafton: I don't want to write Nick and Nora Charles. I don't want to do the Kinsey and George Detective Agency. Otherwise you're stuck with

all the little domestic scenes where they cook up these gourmet treats and have witty repartee. Not cool.

Hillerman: Right now I'm studying a videotape of a Navajo wedding. If Jim Chee keeps carrying on with Janet Pete, she'll probably want a traditional wedding. I don't know if I want to be stuck with all this either.

MM: It doesn't appear that Kinsey will ever get married.

Grafton: No, I can assure you. You're in the middle of telling a gripping tale and have to stop and take care of all the other business. If you don't, your readers start getting cranky.

MM: Are they vocal about it?

Hillerman: One woman frankly said, "For heaven's sake, don't you think it's time Jim Chee got laid?" I don't get any of that from my editors. It's virtually always from women readers.

Grafton: Mine are split. Some say, "Poor thing, can't she have more sex?" The other half say, "Thank goodness you don't stoop to lowly graphic sex." So you don't know which way to go.

Hillerman: I do. I don't particularly like to write it and think it intrudes. Let them get it somewhere else.

Grafton: I get embarrassed. It's nobody's business what Kinsey does in bed. She closes the curtains.

MM: I can only think of two sex scenes in your books.

Grafton: My point exactly. But when I finally get around to it, they're nasty, aren't they?

MM: What other things do readers write to you about?

Grafton: A lot of readers go through the books with flea combs. I don't mind when I've made a genuine error, but I object to this "gotcha" mentality.

Hillerman: They sure are eager to tell us a certain weapon we mentioned

Susan Goodman interviewed Julia Child and Paul Prudhomme in our December 1993–January 1994 issue.



COURTESY TONY HILLERMAN



COURTESY TONY HILLERMAN

Clockwise from below: Grafton and her older sister see their father off to war in 1943. Hillerman is anything but laughing as he receives the Silver Star—while secretly AWOL (he'd slipped away from the hospital for the ceremony). Hillerman poses between deadlines at United Press in 1952.



COURTESY SUE GRAFTON

doesn't have a safety. Or that creosote bushes don't grow at this altitude.

MM: Do their remarks ever help?

Hillerman: Right around the time I quit using Joe Leaphorn and went to Jim Chee, I was signing a woman's book and she said, "Why did you change the name of your detective?" I answered, "It's a different character." She said she couldn't tell them apart.

MM: Ouch.

Hillerman: Dagger through the heart. I couldn't get that out of my mind. So I put both of them in the next book more or less because of what that woman said. And it worked.

MM: Since we're talking "how to," what's your writing routine like?

Grafton: My life is very orderly. Usually I get up at 5:37 or 5:47 and run three miles. Then I read the Metro section to see what that day's absurd homicides are. I go to my desk at 9:00 and work until about 11:30, break for lunch and go back to work until about 3:30. Then I exercise again, because you sit all day long. Writing is hard physical labor and very stress-producing. You have to have some way to blow your tubes and get it out of your system. My husband, Steve, and I eat at 6:00 and I'm asleep at 7:30. We are not fashionable people.

Hillerman: I get up fairly late, at 7:30. As one of my friends says, I always get up at the crack of 10:00. Then I drink a cup of coffee and read the paper. Marie and I have breakfast and I spend about 30 minutes getting ready for the day. By that time I'm tired. So I come in and play a game of solitaire. A couple of games of that and I go into the office and look at the unanswered mail and decide I'll work on that. Turn on the computer—maybe, maybe not—depending on where I am in the book. Right now I've finally gotten a guy on a plane to Manila and I've got some really hard thinking to do, which I haven't been

in the mood to do. So I turn it on, go back over the stuff I've written, maybe take out an adverb or something, then go for a walk.

Grafton: I do that every day of my life. I do anything to avoid the work.

Hillerman: It's the hardest damn concentration. I've been an automobile mechanic, a truck driver, a farmer. Nothing I've ever done is as hard as trying to figure out a relationship between an old Chinese guy and a Durango newspaperman.

MM: Do you set quotas on how much writing you do every day?

Hillerman: I just write until the brain quits operating. But you're writing all the time. I'm writing when I'm eating breakfast, when my wife is telling me something, when I'm driving—I'm running red lights and people are honking at me. I developed a great reputation in committee meetings—

the guy who always took great notes. I'm *always* in the book.

MM: Do you write many drafts before you're done?

Hillerman: Each day I read through my current chapter to get to where I left off. Since it's genetically impossible to do that without making changes, the first half of each chapter becomes quite refined.

Grafton: I tend to write one draft too, reworking it endlessly. While I'm laying out my first chapter, I keep revising it. When I move on to chapter two, I'm still reworking chapter one. So by the time I've finished the entire book, I've gone over everything with double-zero sandpaper.

MM: Do you ever insert themes in your work?

Grafton: Mostly I'm interested in why we do what we do. Why do we

kill each other? Why can't we be happy? I'm looking for answers, trying to figure it out.


Hillerman: I'm a Roman Catholic and believe what Christ taught us is the answer. But the Navajos, Kiowas and Pueblos have also found the answer. Not just lip service, it's the way they live. I don't have any license to preach but I think more people should know about them. I'm as political as I can be while not imposing on my readers. They're not buying me for that.

MM: Speaking about things you feel you can and can't do, I found a list by S. S. Van Dine, *Twenty Rules for Detective Stories*. Van Dine's third rule is "There must be no love interest." His ninth is "There must be but one detective."

Grafton: Another of his rules says there can be just one killer.

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Hillerman: Looks like we've broken that one, too.

Grafton: It's like being a classical musician: Once you understand form, you can fool around with content.

MM: Then what *is* essential to a mystery? Is even a murder necessary?

Grafton: I think so. We live in such a permissive society that homicide is now the only taboo, and even that line gets gray. If you tried to base a book on mere skullduggery, people would yawn. Everybody we know is a crook of one sort or another.

Hillerman: Sue's got a point. When reviewing *The Fly on the Wall*, one critic said, "He writes fairly well but, for God's sake, why didn't he come up with a crime more interesting than stealing cement?"

Grafton: When I worked putting TV movie plots together in Hollywood, they'd always say the stakes have to be higher. Human life is not enough of an issue compared to 40 million dollars worth of cocaine. It was a very corrupt way of looking at the world. One murder does a lot of work for you in a piece of fiction. In fact, when I read mainstream fiction I

think, Where's the murder? Is it just about this fluffy love stuff? Let's get to the punch line.

Hillerman: That's right. There are some really good mainstream writers but their characters are so banal you're bored stiff. You think, I don't care if she divorces her husband, he's a jerk. In fact, so is she.

MM: One character who's never boring is a good villain—and mysteries specialize in them. What kind of monsters prey on society?

Grafton: What is most alarming about evil people is you could probably sit next to them and not know the difference. The villains in this world are people who rationalize away the most atrocious acts. And it only takes a small step to go from rationalizing a white lie to rationalizing more grotesque things.

Hillerman: There are two kinds of gruesome Georges: the type of people who are unable to recognize any difference between good and evil, and the avaricious, who step on people for ambition or money.

MM: Which do you write about?

Hillerman: I focus on the avaricious; they meet my definition of evil. The others are simply crippled psychologically. The first time I had to create a professional killer I had a terrible time believing in him, even though I'd been a police reporter and covered many trials. They just don't seem real to me.

Then I remembered the last execution I covered. This guy wanted to talk to a reporter before going to the gas chamber. He hoped I would write a story because he wanted his mother to find out about him and get his body. "What's your mother's name?" I asked. He didn't know. "Where does she live?" He didn't know. The last time he saw her was his 11th birthday. "She was living in a trailer with an old boy who would get drunk, beat up on her and chase me off," he said. "I stayed in another kid's garage, but his folks made me go home. I thought since it was my birthday, maybe Mom would let me come home again."

But when he went back, the trailer was gone. He spent the rest of his life trying to find that trailer.

I used that story in *People of Darkness*, changing it a bit. When he's dying, my cop tries to comfort him. Of course, the cop doesn't kill him. My cops tend to leave their guns in the glove compartment.

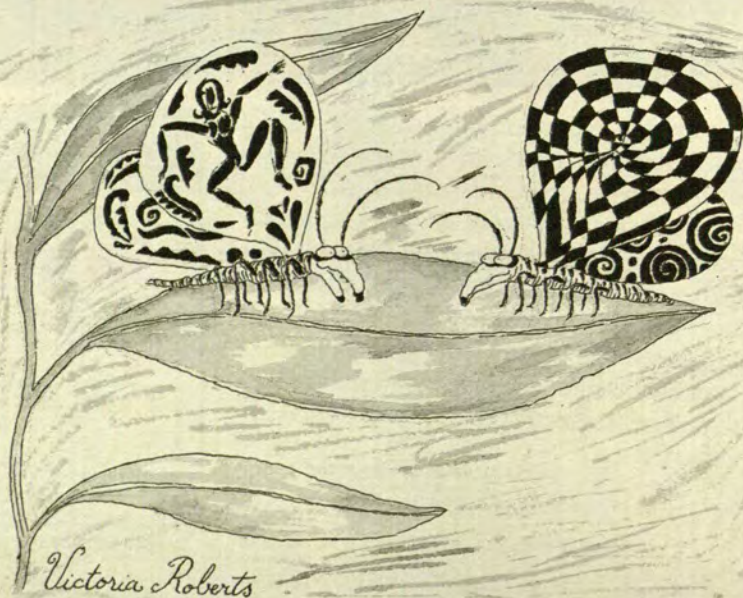
MM: In fact, you once said, "Violence destroys the mood I'm trying to build." But isn't violence an inherent part of a murder's fabric?

Hillerman: Yeah, but do you want to watch it?

Grafton: I agree. I've read books where the violence is so . . .

Hillerman: Savored, lingered over.

Grafton: It invites you to participate as a voyeur, which I don't enjoy. Still, I like to bring conflict to a physical contest. Perhaps it's because, in my life, I never associate with violence and avoid ugly or out-of-control people. So these books allow me to vicariously experience something I have so



"Matisse; who did yours?"

carefully removed from my life.

Actually, my books are quite sanitized compared to the newspaper. "Here are the funnies, the Metro section, the homicides." The pointless, impulsive killings that are our meat and potatoes. At least if you're murdered in a mystery novel, someone has put some thought behind it.

Hillerman: That's right; it isn't just a drunken hit-and-run.

Grafton: Also, someone just as clever as the killer will pursue heaven and earth to see justice is done. In real life that's not always the case. That's what ultimately makes mysteries satisfying—you resolve them.

MM: You both write from the hero's perspective. How much do you identify with your protagonists?

Hillerman: Leaphorn is more my age. Chee is an amalgam of all those flower children I taught back at the

university—idealistic romantics, well-intentioned, but —

MM: You don't like Chee?

Hillerman: I have nothing against Chee; he's my brainchild. But let's say, driving from here to Quebec, I would much rather have Leaphorn in the car.

Grafton: Kinsey is a stripped-down version of me. She's who I would've been had I not married young and had children. She'll always be thinner and younger and braver, the lucky so-and-so. Her biography is different but our sensibilities are identical.

MM: Your bios differ in one way: your stint in Hollywood. Will Kinsey ever make it to the big screen?

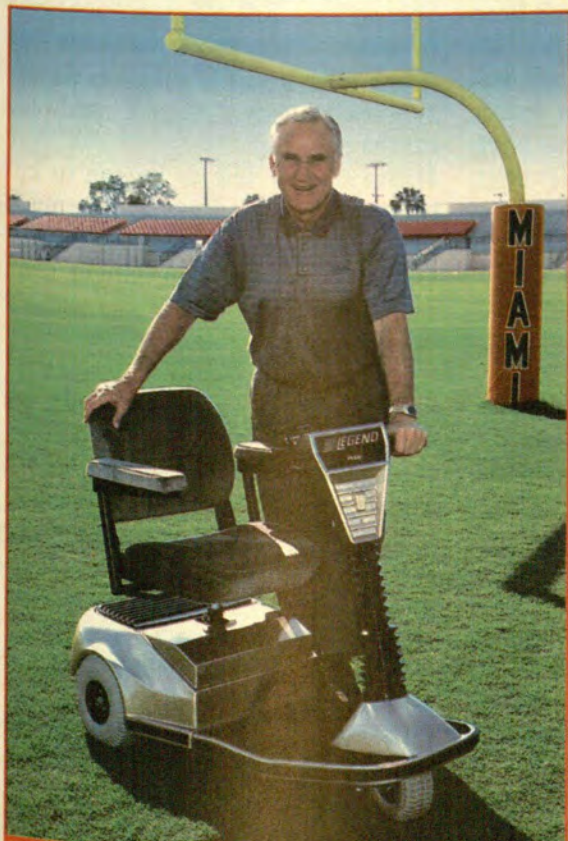
Grafton: Never. I invented Kinsey Millhone as my ticket out of that prison. I'm not going to turn around and sell her back to those people. And

I don't want an actress's face attached to her. Every reader has a different mental picture of Kinsey and that's as it should be.

Hillerman: If I were your age, I'd feel the same way. I'm 70 and hell, I don't care. The books are there, people will always read them. I'm kind of curious to see what they do with mine. [Robert Redford has optioned Hillerman's Navajo books. —Ed.] It's like you've done a watercolor and a sculptor takes over, a totally different form. They make a bad movie, so what. Anyway, you don't have to go see it.

Grafton: I've worked with those people. I don't like them. I don't like the way they play. And I love having something they can't buy. That's true power in Hollywood because everything there is for sale.

MM: One thing you don't have



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power over is reviews. Do they ever bother you?

Grafton: An agent once spoke about a client of his, a comedian, by saying: "Risking public failure on a regular basis is a debilitating business." *Ours* is debilitating; we come up for a job review every year. Critics and readers are always there to assure us we haven't measured up.

Hillerman: I don't think you ever get over it. Either Robert Parker's or Elmore Leonard's wife told me she screened all his reviews. He'd get 18 great ones and the 19th critic feels he's got to say something bad in the third paragraph.

Grafton: To show he's not sucking up to us.

Hillerman: And that's the one critic you remember.

Grafton: You lie in bed ranting, What do you mean the pace was off? The pace was not off! When "*B*" *Is for Burglar* came out, one review said, "'B' is for Boring." I thought I would never recover. I figured I would get graded through F—you know, "'C-' is for Corpse." I was so happy when I got to G.

MM: What about the other side of the coin—the gratification you get from your work?

Hillerman: The Navajo use my books in their schools. I was named a "Special Friend" of the Navajo people. And hey, I got to dance with Miss Navajo. They also like to make fun of me. I taped some of my books, which have a lot of Navajo words in them. I have trouble pronouncing English, much less Navajo. The in-joke on the reservation is to mispronounce words the way I do.

Grafton: What pleases me most are letters from readers that prove somebody really is out there. One woman said she and her father never had anything to talk about until Kinsey Millhone came along.

MM: Are you ever wary of fans?

Grafton: I used to be in the telephone book and people would leave notes under the windshield wiper or get their pictures taken with my VW, "Kinsey Millhone's car." It was all benign but I couldn't help thinking—I write about murder. I write about twisted people. How do I know someone strange won't come out of the woodwork with some obsessive fantasy about me? So we moved.

Hillerman: You're trying to get something done and somebody rings your doorbell.

Grafton: They'd call me up, "We're coming through town from Oklahoma and wonder where Rosie's restaurant is." I'd go, "I made it up. That was fiction, folks."

Hillerman: I always thought unlisted numbers were the last word in snobbery. But one day I said, "Let's keep track of how many calls we get." At 11:30 that morning, the 21st call was a guy from Weehawken, New Jersey, who'd read somewhere I had an Isuzu Trooper. He had an Isuzu Trooper, had some business out in Gallup, and wanted to know what garage I'd recommend. After I hung up I said, "Marie, call the telephone company."

MM: What about the other constraints celebrity has made on your time like book tours and speeches?

Grafton: I came up with a wonderful system that cured me. I get requests like, "Could you come to Toehold, Montana, and speak to a group of people for 40 minutes?" First I say no. Then I calculate how much time it would have taken me to prepare the speech, travel to Toehold, give the speech and get back. If I calculate it would have taken three days out of my life, I give myself three "day-gift" credits, days that now belong to me.

Hillerman: Wonderful!

Grafton: From May till the end of December I collected 83 day gifts of

uninterrupted life and uninterrupted work because I said no. Before, when I got those requests, I'd be irritated. Now I get cheerful.

MM: How will you know if it's ever time to stop writing?

Grafton: Each time I start the next book, I think, Didn't I prove my point? Yet when I get to the end I think, Didn't write the perfect one that time. Better try one more.

Hillerman: As your books begin to sell and your kids grow, you don't have any financial motivation to write anymore. You're not writing for money—what is it, inertia? You're just in the habit. But you've still got these stories in your head. . . .

MM: If either of you finally does put down your pen, how will you end your series—kill off your characters?

Grafton: When you write in the first person, that's a little tricky. Is Kinsey supposed to say, "Arggh!" and fade off the page?

Hillerman: I see no reason to kill these guys. They're never in much danger anyway.

Grafton: Kinsey's in danger from fast food. Nutritionally she walks a razor's edge.

MM: So how *does* somebody get away with murder?

Hillerman: First, I would create a fairly obvious theory of the crime—how it happened and who did it. Once that's established, the cops' emphasis will be on proving that theory. They tend to overlook the other stuff.

Grafton: Then just make sure it had nothing to do with you.

Hillerman: No, I'd have it lead *directly* to me—but with some huge hole in it. I'd get myself charged and go to trial. Then I'd bring out the fatal flaw in their case and be home free.

Grafton: We're devious sons-of-guns, aren't we? ■