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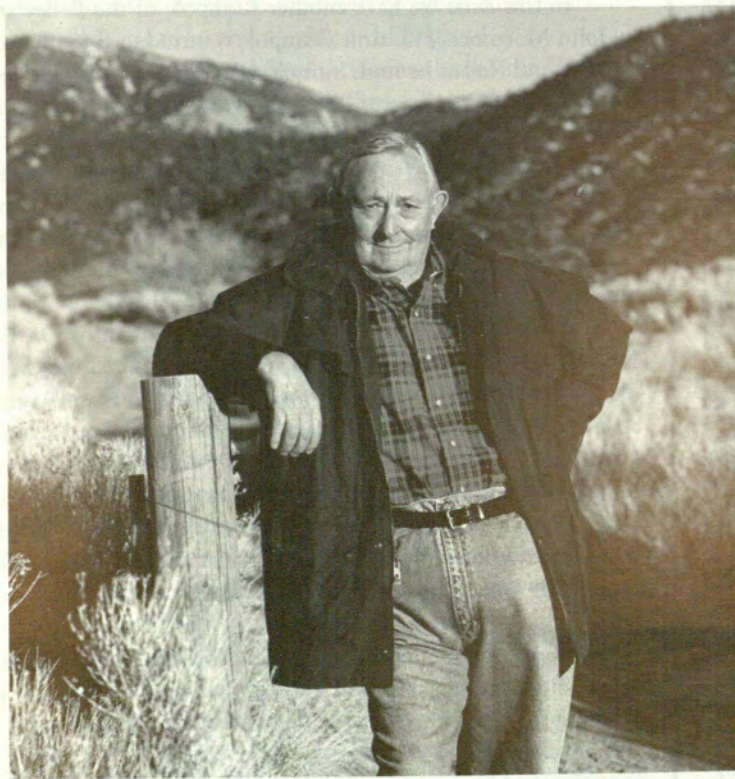
# THE STRAND MAGAZINE

Issue XV 2005

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The Strand Magazine,  
P.O. Box 1418,  
Birmingham, Michigan 48012-1418,  
USA

Telephone:  
(US & Canada) 1 800 300 6652  
(UK) 0 800 961 280  
(Intl.) 248 788 5948

Fax:  
248 874 1046  
E-mail: strandmag@strandmag.com

Visit us on the web at:  
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# INTERVIEW

## Tony Hillerman

by Andrew F. Gulli

“One of our best and most innovative modern mystery writers.”—Robert F. Gish *New York Times*

**T**ONY Hillerman’s mystery novels stand not only as fine literature that is destined to be read for generations to come; they also happen to be best-sellers that focus on a people who have long been ignored and marginalized by society, the American Indian. In 1970, when Hillerman published his first novel, *The Blessing Way*, featuring Navajo Tribal Police lieutenant, Joe Leaphorn, this was uncharted territory.

Born in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma in 1925, Hillerman has spent much of his life in the American southwest. After winning the Silver Star for bravery during the Second World War, Hillerman majored in Journalism at the University of Oklahoma, worked as a reporter for several years, and eventually taught journalism at the University of New Mexico.

Tony Hillerman’s success as a writer lies not only in his ability to spin finely woven plots that integrate character, setting, and Indian folklore into seamless and brilliant stories, but also in the fact that he is writing about a culture he loves and respects. Throughout his novels, his vivid characterization can be described as Dickensian, and stretches beyond the main characters to include unforgettably eccentric minor characters.

In 1973 Hillerman published another Joe Leaphorn mystery, *Dance Hall of the Dead*, and in 1978, *Listening Woman*. In 1980, with *People of Darkness*, he introduced readers to a new detective, Sgt. Jim Chee—a younger less culturally assimilated character than Leaphorn. Chee appeared as the central character in two more Hillerman mysteries, *Dark Wind* (1982) and *The Ghostway* (1984). In 1987, he brought the odd couple of Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn together in *Skinwalkers*, the first of many Joe Leaphorn/Jim Chee novels to become bestsellers.

Tony Hillerman is a Grand Master and former president of Mystery Writers of America. He received a Best Novel Edgar Award for *Dance Hall of the Dead*, as well as the *Grand Prix de Littérature Policière*. The Center for the American Indian presented him with the Ambassador Award, and his novel *Skinwalkers* won the Western Writers’ of America Silver Spur Award for Best Western Novel. His memoir, *Seldom Outdone* (2001), won the Agatha Award for Best Non-Fiction.

—Steven Steinbock

**AFG:** Your book *Kilroy Was There* is a very interesting book. Unfortunately, we have a very glamorous view of war many times.

**TH:** I’m afraid so. When they asked me to do it, I told them I was really busy and I didn’t want to, and they said, well let’s send you some of the pictures. As soon as I saw them I thought, these ought to be published. It’ll give me a chance to drive my axe about this war which I don’t approve of.

**AFG:** Nor do I. I was reading *Skeleton Man* last night and it’s an excellent book. Don’t you have another Joe Leaphorn book coming out this summer?

**TH:** Yes. I’ve got one coming out and I’m on Chapter 15 right now but I don’t have a name for it. It’s called “next book.” [laughs]

**AFG:** What’s it about? Give us a teaser.

**TH:** Joe Leaphorn comes home—he’s retiring, you see—and he gets a call from headquarters telling him he’s got some mail down there. He goes down there and picks up this manilla envelope and there’s a letter from a guy he knew thirty years ago when he was a rookie cop. The guy sends him a picture, a photograph torn out of *Luxury Living Magazine*. It’s a picture of a lovely living room with a fireplace and out the windows you can see the San Francisco Peaks. On the wall is a huge Navajo weaving—which is circled with red ink on the photograph—and the letter attached says, “Doesn’t that rug look like the one you described to me years ago in Washington that

was burned up in an arson fire at a trading post and had all kinds of magical, mystical legends attached to it?” And Leaphorn looks at it and it sure as hell looks like the same rug. His friend says, “The house is just outside of Flagstaff where I live. I’m going to go there and see if the guy will let me take a look at it and I’ll let you know what I find out.” And he gives Joe his phone number. Leaphorn calls the number and gets the guy’s wife and she’s scared. He’s been gone two days and hasn’t come home and someone has left a death threat on their answering machine. So the story is interwoven with this rug and the fire in which the rug was destroyed. Everyone remembers the fire because a man had horribly burned to death in it. It turns out that when they’d gathered all his stuff together, they’d found that he was one of the top guys on the FBI’s most wanted list. So the FBI got involved. And it turns out the fire was started by . . . so forth, so forth. But anyway, some things about it have always puzzled Leaphorn and now, because this guy who sent the letter is missing, Leaphorn’s dragged out of retirement into all of this and that’s what the book’s based on. But my plots are so complicated that I get lost in them myself! It takes me forever. As I say, I’m on Chapter 15 and I keep changing how it’s going to come out.

**AFG:** So you don’t know what’s going to happen next? You just make it up as you go along?

**TH:** Right. It kind of develops. I get some character . . . One of the

characters that I'd planned to be just a throwaway character is suddenly really interesting and now he's going to have an important role.

**AFG:** That's interesting because I've tried to write before and sometimes I'll feel really inspired and I don't have to plan the story and it works and at other times if I don't have it outlined, I may start out fine and then find I just can't go anywhere with the plot and I have to throw it away. Do you ever get to that point when you're writing?

**TH:** No, not really. I get to where I'm not sure how it's going to work, but somebody once said something wise: "Once poor, never rich!" [laughs] I was one of these guys who grew up in the Great American Depression, so I've got to finish this damn book! There was a time or two when I first started and I had a part-time job and three kids and I was bogged down. I knew I could write. I was writing non-fiction and I had an agent who sold my non-fiction magazine articles. But with my first book, *The Blessing Way*, I started thinking, this thing isn't ever going to be published. I would set it on the shelf and then I'd come back to it, so I'd get stuck, yeah, but I was always determined to finish the thing—too much time invested in it.

**AFG:** So who were some of the writers you enjoyed reading while you were growing up?

**TH:** I read anything . . . We didn't have a library. We lived in a little-bitty place with a population of about forty-something, a village with no library anywhere near. The nearest library was in the county seat. It was the Carnegie Library and you had to be a local person to check books out. So we'd get books from the state library by mailing off for them. They sent you a mimeographed list of books available and then you'd pick out a list and you'd send them book rate stamps along with your order. Then about three weeks would pass and you'd get a package in the mailbox. You'd open it and on the top would be a mimeographed letter which would say, "Dear library patron, we are sorry to inform you that the books you ordered were not on our shelves. However, we have selected six other books which we hope will meet your needs." And that's how I came to read *The History of the Post-Felon Cotton Economy in the Mississippi Delta*.

**AFG:** Or *The Elements of Engineering*.

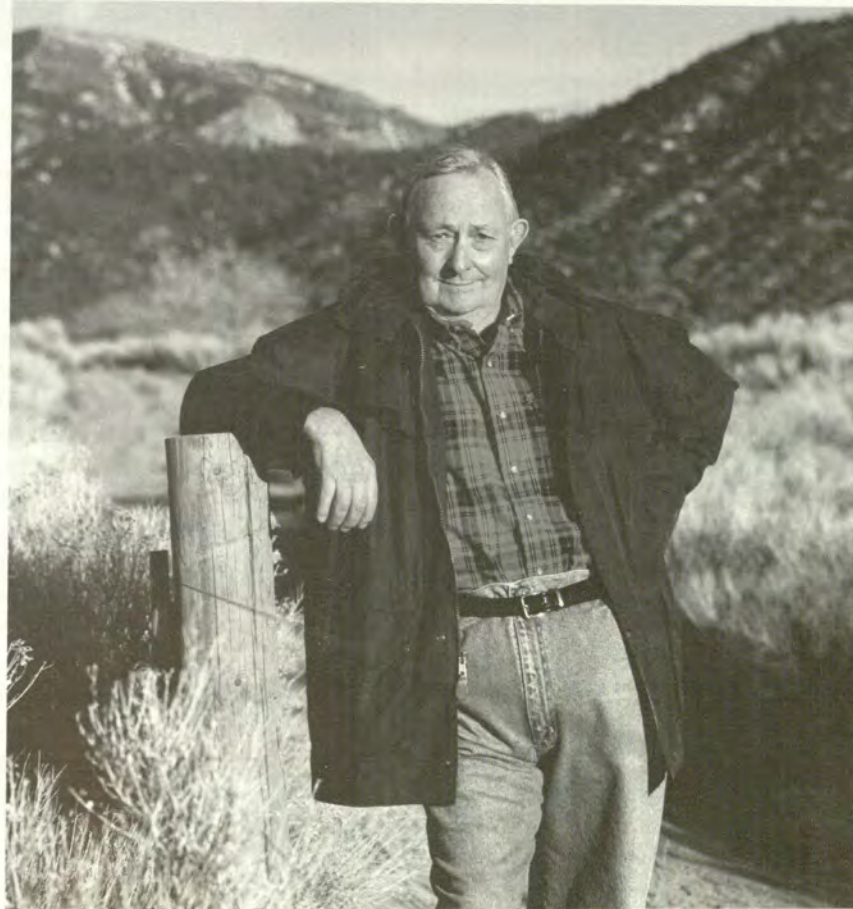
**TH:** Yeah, that's right. *Bobbsey Twins on Mulberry Island*. You'd get some good ones, too. And anyway, I read everything. Then when I

got older, in my mid to early teens, I was a salesman for Curtis Brown, selling magazines like *Country Gentleman* and *Saturday Evening Post*. I couldn't sell many because nobody lived round us, but I enjoyed reading the serialised stories. I liked the Australian writer Arthur Upfield who wrote *The Pointed Bone* and *Death of a Lake*. He wrote mysteries set in Australia with an Australian Aborigine policeman, Napoleon Bonaparte, and boy were they fascinating. I just got hung up on

that and that's what really influenced me to pick a culture you could immerse your stories in.

**AFG:** Who did you model Joe Leaphorn on? Did you have anybody in mind?

**TH:** Yeah. When I first got out of college the war was over—World War II. I graduated in '48 when there were a lot of people graduating and the market, which had been wide open, was suddenly jammed. The only job I could get, which I was happy to grab, was a job on a West Texas newspaper—*Borger News Herald*. There was this young sheriff in that county of Texas who was a big ol' good-looking young



fellow probably about 33 or 35 years old—an old man to me though, as I was about 21 or 22. He was not only smart as hell but he was humane. I liked him and so I always kept him in mind as a model policeman. And, also, I first got my attitude about the FBI from him. He was locally famous for catching some bank robbers who had robbed the bank in Pampa [Texas], which is not far away. I asked him about it—grilling him about it—and he said, "Well, part of the secret is that with any kind of crime that involves crossing state lines or banks, federal crimes, you have to get them solved before the FBI learns about it. Once the FBI gets started, they take over. It's not that the agents aren't smart enough, but they're so hung up on bureaucracy. And the agents . . . Here they are out in the Texas Panhandle, and the closest they've ever been to the Texas Panhandle is Philadelphia. They don't know the people, they don't know the roads, they don't know the customs, and so it gives them a terrible disadvantage." Anyway, that was kind of a standard attitude among local cops about the FBI, I noticed, and in fact there are books on it. I was a police reporter for quite awhile in Texas and Oklahoma, and I covered New Mexico. You get to know a lot of police. At book

signings you can spot them. When I notice there are policemen or if they read my book they might mention it to me, I always ask them whether I was too tough on the FBI. I haven't met one yet who thought I was tough enough! [laughs]

**AFG:** How about FBI people? Do they read your books?

**TH:** Well, yeah, some of them do. I have several FBI friends, in fact. I just had lunch awhile back with a couple of them, a young man and a young woman, who both thought I had it figured about right. The Bureau they both work in, for example, is divided into two sections—same building but they're separated because one of the sides of the building reports to one set of bureaucrats and the other side of the building reports to another set of bureaucrats. And this is in a rather small office. They tell me it's all tied up with paperwork and political bureaucracy.

**AFG:** It's all red tape in Washington.

**TH:** It's just that. We had a case out here a couple of years ago in that corner of Colorado nearer Arizona. Somebody stole a water truck and a policeman stopped it. He got out of his car and one of the guys in the truck got out and machine-gunned him, of all things. They drove down the highway across the Colorado border and into Arizona and now it's a federal crime. And away they go. It was a pretty big story because policemen don't get machine-gunned much out on the highways like this. Everybody thought that because there are militia groups and survivalist groups camping out in the mountains here—anti-government, a lot of them—that maybe the water truck had been stolen to fill it full of explosives like they did in Oklahoma City. So it was a big deal. They drove into the Navajo reservation and one of my friends who was on the Navajo Tribal Police (it was in his area) said they found the abandoned stolen truck and the body of one of the three guys. This friend of mine is an officer, and he's got a lot of other guys under him. He said he called in all his guys and said, "Look, somebody's told the FBI about this now and they've taken over and I don't have to tell you what that means. It means we won't catch anybody, but they're going to have to have a scapegoat. We have to do everything right. Don't make any mistakes." Well, sure enough, they never did catch them. A Navajo policeman found another one of them dead. But the FBI evacuated Bluff, Utah. Now you say, uh-huh, but imagine if you knew Bluff, Utah. Causing those people to evacuate boggles the mind.

**AFG:** How big an area is it?

**TH:** It's not very big, but it's full of very independent-minded people and this happened right in the heart of the tourist season, when they make their money!

**AFG:** What happened to the locals when they were evacuated?

**TH:** I don't know where they went! I called a guy I know there who runs a little riverboat trip out there and said, "I can't believe you evacuated!" And he said, "Well I can't believe I did either, but there was a knock on the door and I got to the door and there was this guy standing there. He's got a three-piece suit on and a necktie and he's shaved and got a haircut. I figured he was an FBI agent, and he was. And he said you've got thirty minutes to get out of here, to evacuate. I stood there and I looked at him and thought, well, let's see now, I'll grab him by the necktie and throw him out on the grass. Get him off my property. And then I thought I got two daughters right now wanting to go to college. It'll be a big deal and I'll get arrested and I got to be here and run this business, so I evacuated."

**AFG:** So how many people were evacuated?

**TH:** The population is about 800 to 1000. But I don't know how many they evacuated. I talked to two or three people who did leave. One lady told me she was hanging out her laundry and she saw this truck (Bluff is right on the San Jose River, a mountainous area and real pretty country) turn up this road that runs past the house up a kind of a ravine. So she said she quit hanging up laundry and went inside and called the FBI, because the FBI had been on the TV telling people to call this number if they noticed anything. So she called and got somebody in Colorado and told him what she'd seen and that the road was a dead-end up in that canyon and if they got somebody over they'd have him caught. So she finished hanging up her laundry, then went and got her rocking chair and sat there all morning and nobody came. She went in and cooked lunch, went back out and rocked on the rocking chair awhile, and still nobody came. So she called the local sheriff and he said, "Well, the FBI haven't told us anything about it." So she called the Navajo State Police and pretty soon some Navajo cops came, but by then the guy had gone somewhere else. They never did find anybody.

**AFG:** So there's a killer out on the loose.

**TH:** Probably so. The Navajos did find another body. The FBI offered a quarter of a million dollar reward on television, and the guy that I knew that ran the boat trips said he just got flooded with business—all these bounty hunters running in and renting everything he had that would float down the San Juan. There was one guy who was a psychic. He was going to float down the San Juan in a canoe seeking psychic vibrations!

**AFG:** Oh no! But I'm not surprised. So what are some of the writers you enjoy reading today?

**TH:** What I've got on my bedside table is Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. I read it years ago and I'm rereading some of those guys. I'd really like to see if I could learn something from them. You can always learn something from those good old ones.

**AFG:** Oh, they're the best.

**TH:** I'll go back and read Joan Dideon—her non-fiction. When I taught writing at university I used to have my students read her and she's a really skillful writer.

**AFG:** So tell me, when you look at the state of the world, are you optimistic or pessimistic about things?

**TH:** Well, I'm a Harry Truman Democrat and I thought George Bush misled us into this war. I thought he was not well-informed at all about the situation in the Middle East. I was hoping that the Democrats would come up with somebody like Harry Truman but they came up with another "Yaley," oddly enough, a fraternity brother who struck me as being not much smarter than George Dubya. You know, I think almost anybody who represented the kind of old Democratic Party that I used to love would have beaten George W to become President, but Kerry was not the man for it. I'm optimistic. I think this is a good, strong country and Bush . . . Well, obviously he was smart enough to get a college degree, although Yale is not a place I'd recommend for someone who's a *bona fide* intellectual. But I'm optimistic.

**AFG:** So what did you think of the television adaptation of *Skinwalkers*?

**TH:** Well, early in my career I once got assigned to write a script, based on one of my books, and it made me aware of how difficult it

is to take a book and fashion it into a movie shorter than seventeen hours and thirty minutes! So I thought they did, to a varying degree, a good job on the three they used. The last one was probably better. There was a lot of stuff that I treasured that they had to leave out, but I can't complain. I got them to change one line in the last one and they complied with it. They had a scene in the original where the red-headed gal was trying to seduce Leaphorn and I didn't like that, so they got rid of that and had her instead shacking up with Chee. Not my kind of writing, but they still had their clothes on in the film.

**AFG:** As long as they had their clothes on! So on whom did you model Chee? Was it one of your students?

**TH:** Well, he was a sort of mixture of them. I needed somebody not as old-fashioned as Leaphorn and I sort of homogenized a bunch of the students I was teaching and added a Navajo element. The young Indians, especially the Navajo, were sort of kidnapped by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and hauled off to boarding schools where they missed learning of their own culture—for example through winter stories. The Navajo teach their children in the hogans on winter nights and the boarding school kids never got that. The old-timers like Leaphorn know all the mythology but a lot of the younger ones don't know that much. There are so many things about the Navajo, particularly the Navajo culture, that I like, that you don't want them to lose. Their attitude about greed, their attitude about helping people that need help, not remembering slights—forgiving, you know.

**AFG:** That would be terrible to lose. So tell me, do you like to travel?

**TH:** I love to travel, but I've got arthritis and I've got a sciatica nerve problem so I think twice before I take trips. You know, I don't travel very well any more. I'll be 80, you see. I'm 79 and I'm getting old, and I'm beginning to feel it.

**AFG:** My grandmother is ninety, so I don't consider you old. What are some of the hobbies you like to do besides writing?

**TH:** I used to like to go fishing. I used to be a trout fisherman. I plodded up and down many of these little streams, but as I say, I've got a bad ankle and a bad leg out of World War II and the arthritis doesn't help any, so I'm not up to that kind of fishing any more. Since I don't like fishing out of a boat, I really don't have much of a hobby anymore, except reading and writing. And I go for walks a little bit along the irrigation ditches.

**AFG:** So are you ever going to retire from writing?

**TH:** I don't think so. I'd drive my wife crazy if I wasn't writing. One thing I'd kind of like to do is go through my files. I've got a four-drawer storage cabinet right behind me of stuff I've written over the years and Harper Collins likes the idea of me doing a retrospective sampler going way back into the fifties with stuff I was writing for various magazines.

**AFG:** That would be interesting.

**TH:** When I start to look at some of the stuff, I think I wrote better when I was in my twenties than I do now. I may do that. I don't know. But I'm not going to quit writing. I don't think I'll quit writing the Leaphorn stories either.

**AFG:** That's great. I'm glad to hear that. I know that you saw a lot of bloodshed during World War II. How did seeing that color your view of the world?

**TH:** It makes me very much aware that we're all a lot alike. Yes-

terday I was talking about how hard it is to quit smoking, and it made me remember how we captured a German machine-gunner in a barn loft one day. We were tapping him down and he was standing there with his hands up and he had a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes in his pocket. (The town was Schillersdorf. We had captured it and then the Germans had recaptured it and we captured it back from them, see?) So I took his package of Lucky Strikes and put them in my pocket. I didn't even smoke but I knew he'd taken them off a dead American. He got all upset! Bear in mind there were three of us standing with guns pointing at him! He told us that the deal was off. If we didn't give him back his cigarettes, he wasn't going to quit! [laughs] I gave him back his cigarettes! And you know, he was just another teenager like we were. Generally we didn't get talking much to the Germans we were fighting, but when we captured one, you know, they were just guys like us, doing what they were sent out to do.

**AFG:** Yes. My favourite quote about war is what Peter Ustinov said. He said something like, the problem with war is you don't have time to get to know your enemy to see if you can get along with each other.

**TH:** That's true. After the war I went back over there with some of the guys from my platoon and we took our wives to show them, you know, and to look at where we'd been. We went to some of the towns where we'd been and where we'd captured some of the people who'd been on the other side, and they were just like us. So I hate war.

**AFG:** It's a horrible thing. Well, you've been married for 54 years, you have six kids, and you're a best-selling writer. What's your secret?

**TH:** I think I've been awful lucky, to tell you the truth. I've had a lot of good luck. Well, finding my wife was spectacular and flunking an algebra course persuaded me I didn't really want to be an engineer. I won the Silver Star about the same time I was wounded, and when I got out of the war, *The Daily Oklahoman* did a big feature story on me. They got letters I'd written my mother—my mother was a widow—and this lady, Beatrice Stahl her name was, told my mother that she'd like to talk to me when I got home. I didn't know anybody in Oklahoma City. We were farmers and my mother had moved up there when we'd shut the farm down. When I got home, I went down to see this Beatrice Stahl, and she told me that I should be a writer. And I said, well you see, I'm blind. My left eye is legally blind according to the VA. I didn't know what I wanted to be, but I did like to write. So I went to journalism school and found out I could write. Isn't that luck?

**AFG:** Luck and skill. Luck, skill, and drive. Did you meet your wife at journalism school?

**TH:** I met my wife in senior year. I had just turned 21. She was getting her degree in Molecular Biology or something, something very above and beyond me! I met her at a dance. I never usually went to dances because, hell, I was walking on a cane. And I saw this dazzlingly pretty, sweet-looking brunette dancing. I cut in on her and stepped on her foot, of course, and we got along real fine. Before long I was deeply in love with her.

**AFG:** Well, Tony, it was so nice talking to you. I really enjoyed it. It was more like a conversation.

**TH:** Well I enjoyed it, too, tell you the truth. Take care of yourself. ♦