

scribe's

THE LIMIT

TONY HILLERMAN
WRITERS CONFERENCE



Craig Smith | For The New Mexican

"Darling Evelyn ... May I ask your help — it's about my next novel ... The fact is I've begun to be appalled by the difficulties of technique, a thing which has hitherto never worried me at all."

Anyone who writes will appreciate that complaint from novelist-historian Nancy Mitford, in a 1947 letter to Evelyn Waugh. Technique is a tool with which a writer combines ideas, situations, characters, and plots into a tale that draws a reader in, and it comes in various forms and sizes. But what do you do when your favorite gizmo goes blunt or the end snaps off?

The obvious answer is to have more choices in your tool kit, and one of the best ways to get them is to keep learning. Since 2004, the Tony Hillerman Writers Conference has been providing that opportunity by bringing aspiring and successful authors together — first in Albuquerque, and now in Santa Fe.



Tony Hillerman

The 2011 workshop runs Thursday to Saturday, Nov. 10 to 12, at Hotel Santa Fe. Paid registration for the entire conference or single days is required to attend workshops and presentations, but a free public talk and book signing take place at 7 p.m. on Saturday with Bruce Held, director of intelligence and counterintelligence at the Department of Energy and author of *A Spy's Guide to Santa Fe and Albuquerque*.

Jean Schaumburg and Anne Hillerman are principals of WordHarvest, the convention's longtime presenter. The event was first conceived as a tribute to Anne's father, beloved mystery writer and journalist Tony Hillerman (1925-2008). "Jean and I came up with the idea," Hillerman said. "It began as way to honor him when we started it. He had just been diagnosed with prostate cancer, and his brother had died of a heart attack. We thought we could honor him and give him pleasure.

"At first, he was rather hesitant, and said, 'Let me think about it over the weekend.' Then he said, 'OK, if I don't have to do any of the work.' We said, 'You won't have to do any work, but if you would like, we'd love to have you come and speak to folks who come to the conference.' He loved to talk, as you know. He said, 'Oh, that's different!'"

Tony Hillerman participated in the Albuquerque conference from 2004 through 2007. After he died, the conference presenters took a year off, but they resumed in 2010 in Santa Fe. "Dad not only died, but Jean's father died," Anne Hillerman said. "We thought it would be best to take that year off. Now, we're experimenting with the format. It's a hybrid from the conferences we used to do and last year's."

There are many topics to discuss, and they've been arranged so that every participant can attend every talk or session. And there are noted writers in plenty to listen to and learn from.

Douglas Preston, a writer of thrillers, speculative fiction, and creative nonfiction, gives the keynote speech at the Nov. 12 closing dinner: "The Monster of Florence, or How I Fell into One of My Novels." He also leads a session titled, "The Plot Thickens: Keep Readers Turning Those Pages" during the conference.

Other speakers and panelists are thriller author David Morrell, mystery writer Sandi Ault, historian Hampton Sides, novelists Jo-Ann Mapson and

Virginia Scharff, editor Peter Joseph, investigative report Sally Denton, and agent Elizabeth Trupin-Pulli. Topics range from "Why the Novel Will Never Die" and "The Art and Craft of Narrative Non-Fiction" to "Building Tension," "The Changing Face of Publishing," and "Pitches, Synopses and Queries to Seduce an Editor/Agent."

"Some of these are folks we have worked with before, first-rate writers and first-rate presenters," Hillerman noted. "Some, like Doug Preston, we wanted to work with for years but never had the opportunity to. We try to mix it up with new people and seasoned faculty and people who have not worked with us before."

"This is one of the best conferences for its size as far as writers go," Schaumburg said. "One day is a pre-conference for hands-on writing. The next day is the craft of writing, and the next is the business of writing — the current best ways to get published. People are getting it, they learn from the sessions. ... It's not genre specific. It's for all writers, of all abilities. Neither Anne nor I are teaching. We organize it. That's plenty."

The Albuquerque workshops generally drew about 150 participants and fielded around 15 presenters, Schaumburg recalled. The Santa Fe conference this year was budgeted for 50 to 60 attendees and 19 presenters. Besides the working sessions, the conference is the occasion for presenting the 2011 Tony Hillerman Prize for best first mystery, which carries an award of \$10,000 and publication by the Thomas Dunn imprint of St. Martin's Press; the Tony Hillerman Short Story Prize (in collaboration

with *New Mexico Magazine*); and the inaugural Leaphorn Award, named after Hillerman's Navajo master detective. It will go to Barbe Awalt and Paul Rhett, the founders of LPD Press and the New Mexico Book Co-op.

Hillerman and Schaumburg agree that the growing number of outlets for writers, from the traditional agent-publisher method to the more adventurous self-publication route, are both a godsend and a potential pitfall. "An agent helps," Schaumburg said. "They can have a lot of good suggestions of books publishers are looking for, or direct you to a

publisher looking for a particular thing. And they can tell you, nobody's looking for that. But people who self-publish are having more luck now than in the past. And there is more real money available to them."

Hillerman cautioned, "Self-publishing is good, but there are no editors. The danger is, deceiving yourself that you're better than you really are. I think that's why conferences like this are good. ... Writing can't be a hobby," she said. "If you are going to be a successful writer, you have to have the same kind of dedication you would if you were going to be an engineer. It has to be a priority or it never gets done. I have to say my dad really was a great role model for that. He wrote novels while teaching at the University [of New Mexico] and raising six kids.

"Men of his generation, their vision of responsibility to the family was being the breadwinner. All us kids knew he loved us, but writing was his passion. We could tell how it was going. He was happy on days when it was going well, not so much on days it was not going well." ◀

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Join
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- ▼ Tony Hillerman Writers Conference
 - Thursday to Saturday, Nov. 10 to 12
 - Hotel Santa Fe, 1501 Paseo de Peralta, 825-9876
 - \$60-\$425; 471-1565, www.wordharvest.com
 - Opening talk and book signing with Bruce Held, author of *A Spy's Guide to Santa Fe and Albuquerque*
 - 7 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 10
 - Hotel Santa Fe; no charge

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