

THE SHAPE SHIFTER

by Tony Hillerman

2006, Harper Collins, 276 pages

Tony Hillerman started writing his series about Navajo tribal policeman-detective Lt. Joe Leaphorn with *The Blessing Way* in 1970. Later Leaphorn, the "Legendary Lieutenant," retires and Hillerman replaces him with an equally deeply refreshing character, Officer Jim Chee.

The principal setting for the Leaphorn/Chee crime novels is the Four Corners, a large area of high plains and mountainous terrain encompassing NE Arizona, SE Utah, SW Colorado, and NW N. Mexico. This area is home to the Navajo reservation, the Hopis, and other American Indian nations.

Over the years, Mr. Hillerman, winner of several awards for mystery writing, has attracted a dedicated following; each new novel appears regularly on the New York Times bestseller list. *The Shape Shifter* is no exception.

As a technical writer with considerable editing experience, I'm struck by the exactitude of Hillerman's use of the language. English, that is... which may be due in large part to his journalistic background. Second, I've always thought his descriptive passages of the harsh yet beautiful environment where the Navajos live are without equal. He makes me feel part of that world (and I like it).

Yet, as all great writers of fiction, Hillerman conveys his imagination mainly through the morality play of his characters. In *The Shape Shifter*, a detective friend tells now-retired Joe Leaphorn that a rug thought to have been destroyed in a fire seems to have appeared in a recent art magazine photograph.

The connection between the fire and loose ends of Leaphorn's final case before retirement is too tantalizing for Leaphorn to ignore. Bored and while his lady friend is away on business, Joe decides to help his friend out on a freelance basis. When his detective friend winds up missing, then dead, the Legendary Lieutenant realizes he's onto something as dangerous as it is extraordinary.

As you follow Joe through the pages as he talks with people both Navajo and *belegana* (white), from local law enforcement to the FBI—Leaphorn and Chee often refer to it as the Federal Bureau of Ineptitude—, rich and poor, and old and new, you slowly grasp the harmonic, rhythmical Navajo way. Hillerman weaves a rainbow of ideas, as well as people, into his Four Corners tapestry, and he does it so subtly you hardly notice.

To make you aware of the context of the journey as well as the journey itself is the mark of a true artist. Hillerman still gives you your "plot, plot, and plot" (as Ayn Rand once opined), but he does so with the inevitability of a wave reaching the shore rather than a race car crossing the finish line.

Also, this is one of the first Hillerman books to feature a character from SE Asia. (From whom, by the way, we learn quite a lot of another magical way of looking at the universe.) Won't spoil the plot, except to say Leaphorn and Chee are the sorts of cops we'd like to see everywhere. Reading Hillerman's books, one also comes away with the distinct conclusion federal or central-government justice is a contradiction in terms.