HILLERMAN, TONY (1925–2008).

A mystery writer, Tony Hillerman was born on May 27, 1925, in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma. Of German ancestry and son of August A. and Lucy Grove Hillerman, Hillerman lived in a house that his father assembled out of oil-field shotgun houses. He attended St. Mary’s Academy, a Catholic-Potawatomi boarding school, graduated from Konawa High School in 1942, enrolled in one semester at Oklahoma A&M College, and enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1943. Combat in France in World War II earned him the Silver Star, Bronze Star, and Purple Heart.

Following military service Hillerman returned to academia and graduated with a degree in journalism in 1948 from the University of Oklahoma. In August he married Marie Unzer, a union that would yield six children. Between 1948 and 1962 he pursued his journalism career and engaged in writing jobs that included radio commercials, police reporter, political correspondent, newspaper editor in Texas and Oklahoma, and finally as a bureau manager for the United Press in New Mexico. He also held a job as a truck driver. During regular stops on the Navajo Reservation he witnessed his first Navajo curing ceremony, the Enemy Way, which had a profound effect on him.

In 1963 Hillerman enrolled at the University of New Mexico, eventually working as a special assistant to the president while completing a master’s degree in creative writing. He became a professor of journalism in 1966 and ultimately served as department chair. His venture into fiction writing began in the late 1960s, and his first novel, The Blessing Way, was published in 1970.

Following the success of The Blessing Way, Hillerman continued to explore the Southwest, particularly the Navajo Reservation, with novels such as Dance Hall of the Dead and Listening Woman, which focused on the central character of Joe Leaphorn. Illustrating his adeptness at constructing well-developed characters, Hillerman created a tribal policeman with a degree in anthropology and previous experience with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Hillerman also created a younger, more traditional Navajo character, Jim Chee, as a counterbalance to Leaphorn’s calculating approach to investigation. Like his predecessor, Chee also possesses a degree in anthropology (from the University of New Mexico), and although he applied to and was accepted by the FBI, Chee declined and remained on the reservation. Through these two Hillerman explores the uniqueness of the Southwest, especially the relationship between culture, landscape, and the individual, which is germane to the development of his mysteries, including Skinwalkers, A Thief of Time, Talking God, Coyote Waits, and Sacred Clowns. Although he abandoned these figures in later works, his concept of the interconnectedness of region and culture remains evident.

Hillerman’s novels have made the New York Times bestseller list four times and have been translated into at least thirteen languages, including Japanese. He has received many honors, including the Edgar Award and the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America, the Silver Spur Award for Western novels, the Ansell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Center for the Book, and the Navajo Tribe’s Special Friend Award. Robert Redford purchased the film rights to three Hillerman books and released The Dark Wind in 1991. By creating a genre of mysteries that center on American Indian cultures in the Southwest, Tony Hillerman expanded not only the field of mystery writing, but broadened the scope of Western American literature. He died on October 26, 2008, of pulmonary failure.

Nathan Wilson

See also: CAROLYN GIMPEL HART, JAMES MYERS THOMPSON

Bibliography
Fred Erisman, Tony Hillerman (Boise: Idaho: Boise State University, 1989).

Citation