

# Seldom Disappointed

BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI

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Courtesy HarperCollins Publishers

From decorated soldier to  
bestselling author,  
Tony Hillerman is still  
the unpretentious  
farm boy from  
Sacred Heart, Oklahoma.

When he was a 17-year-old college freshman in 1942, Tony Hillerman told his academic counselor he wanted to major in chemical engineering. "I didn't really know what I wanted to do," says Hillerman, who later graduated from the University of Oklahoma and became one of America's best-loved mystery writers. "I just knew a negative: I didn't want to be a farmer because you couldn't make a living at it." *continued*

That much he knew from growing up the youngest of three children in the tiny farming community of Sacred Heart, Oklahoma. His family was one of farmers and shopkeepers who never made much money at either. When his father died the same year he graduated from high school, there was only enough money to send Hillerman to Oklahoma A&M College (now Oklahoma State University)—chosen because it was the least expensive alternative—for one semester.

**H**e immediately sought part-time employment to help make ends meet, working variously as a dishwasher in a boarding house, a janitor in a dentist's office, in the university's ROTC unit where he stored equipment after drills, and in the College of Agriculture where he earned the fantastic wage—for the time—of 35 cents an hour.

Still, his earnings were not enough to cover the costs of tuition, books, room and board, and he returned to Sacred

the end of the war when an explosion left him with two broken legs, a mangled foot and ankle, facial burns and temporary blindness. Discharged with the Silver Star, Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster and Purple Heart, the young soldier still was not quite sure what to do with the rest of his life.

As providence would have it, when *The Daily Oklahoman*—the newspaper in Oklahoma City where his mother, Lucy, then lived—was notified by the Army about his medals of valor, a reporter contacted her. One thing led to another, and Lucy shared with the reporter, Beatrice Stahl, some of the letters her son had written from France and Italy. When he arrived home, he paid a visit to Stahl, who suggested he become a writer. Shortly thereafter, he visited Larry Grove, his cousin and best friend, who was recuperating from war injuries in the Navy hospital in nearby Norman.

"Larry wanted to be a surgeon," Hillerman explains, "but he got one hand pretty shot up in the war and had only part of it left. So

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patriotic war,  
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afraid it  
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As with most members of "the greatest generation," military service ended Tony Hillerman's youth and profoundly influenced the rest of his life. Shown in a French village with part of Fourth Platoon, C Company, 410<sup>th</sup> Infantry, looking uncharacteristically tidy, Tony (grenade in lapel) is on the jeep hood at center.

*Photos courtesy Tony Hillerman*

Heart. "My brother was in the Air Force, leaving me the last son who could run the family business, so I went home and tried to be a farmer," he recalls. "I raised cattle and did about as well as anybody else, but there wasn't any rain."

Besides, the war was raging in Europe and Asia, and Hillerman was eager to join up. "It was a patriotic war," he says, "and I was so afraid it would be over before I could get in it. My mother was a very understanding woman, and she signed the papers to permit me to enlist."

He saw combat in Europe and was seriously wounded near

we both decided to become writers and thought we'd go to the University of Oklahoma." At OU, his journey to becoming a writer began in earnest. He was influenced particularly by H. H. Herbert, from whom he took an ethics class. "No one made the impression on me professionally that Herbert did," Hillerman says of the man for whom the School of Journalism was later named. "He taught me that a community newspaper's news side preempted its advertising revenue—the paper had a responsibility to the community; it had to be the watchdog. 'Look at the police blotter,' Herbert told us, 'and always know who's in jail because it might be someone you don't expect, and you'll have to tell the community about it.' "

Those lessons carried Hillerman through his years as a reporter and editor at small and medium-sized newspapers throughout the Southwest, beginning with the *Borger* (Texas) *News-Herald*, and ending with *The New Mexican* in Santa Fe, where he was a general assignment and statehouse reporter. Years later, as a professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, he, too, taught ethics. "I only repeated to my students the lessons I learned from Herbert," he says.

In 1963, Hillerman deserted journalism for academia when the chairman of the UNM journalism department, who was planning to retire, suggested he earn a master's degree and eventually take over the department. At the same time, Hillerman's itch to write novels was growing. With a family

to support, however, he needed a source of income while he pursued his studies and his writing. He landed a job as an assistant to UNM's president, Tom Popejoy, where he discovered just how different academia was from the newspaper business.

"It was like stepping into a different world," he says. "I went from a six-day workweek and getting a story written every minute to an environment of thinkers. Time no longer mattered. I was both impressed and horrified."

On one occasion, he was handed an inch-thick stack of proposals written by various UNM science departments that wanted a few thousand acres owned by the university to conduct research. He was asked to condense the proposals, which explained why each department felt it should get the land, into a short report.

"I figured I'd review the proposals that night and write something the next day," Hillerman recalls. "I asked the administrator overseeing the project when it needed to be completed. He said on the 17<sup>th</sup>. I thought he either had a bad calendar or didn't know what day it was. It was already the 19<sup>th</sup>. I asked him if he wanted it the 17<sup>th</sup> of the following month, and he said, 'If you can have it finished by then.'"

Two of his graduate school courses—literary criticism and American humor—whetted his appetite for writing fiction. "In the humor course, we were taught that there was absolutely nothing funny about humor, but we were shown how a writer could get a chuckle through skillful writing. In the literary criticism course, for first time I understood Shakespeare as a practical, ink-stained wretch trying to make a living," he says.

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Returning from World War II, Tony enrolled in the University of Oklahoma. Here he assumes the role of the caddy in photojournalism class. The golfer at left is Dick Wharton, and at right, surreptitiously improving his lie, is Bill Shelton.

The Bard's work made such an impact that themes of *Othello* are woven throughout Hillerman's latest novel, *The Wailing Wind*. Released in May 2002, it reached the No. 3 spot on *The New York Times* bestseller list and No. 8 on *The International Herald Tribune* bestseller list.

After earning his master's degree in 1966, Hillerman made good on his promise to take on the UNM chairmanship. He taught there until 1987.

During those years, he wrote a slew of well-received mystery novels—among them *Listening Woman*, *Dance Hall of the Dead*, *The Fly on the Wall*, *The Blessing Way*, *The Dark Wind* and *Skinwalkers*—many of which revolved around Navajo Tribal Police detectives Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. Some years back, *The Dark Wind* was made into a film that Hillerman says did better in Europe than in the United States. An adaptation of *Skinwalkers*, produced by Robert Redford, aired on the PBS series "Mystery!" in November.

He is comfortable writing about Native American culture, he says, because most of his friends and classmates back home in Sacred Heart were Pottawatomie and Seminole Indians.

"The first time I pulled up to an old trading post [in New Mexico] and saw a few elderly Navajos sitting on a bench, I felt right at home," he says. "It was like a time warp taking me back to Sacred Heart."

He greatly admires the practical values of the Navajos and Hopis, who, he says, are much closer to true Christianity than the average American Christian. "They believe in strong family values, respect for women, and that wealth equals profound

evil—if you have more than you need, you must be bad. The ultimate responsibility is to the community, not to oneself.”

Hillerman, who still lives in Albuquerque, also has written non-fiction, including *The Great Taos Bank Robbery*, *The Spell of New Mexico* and *Indian Country* and a children’s book, *The Boy Who Made Dragonfly*. His numerous writing awards include the Mystery Writers of America’s Edgar and Grand Master Awards, the Nero Wolfe Award, the Center for the American Indian’s Ambassador Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Center for the Book, the Silver Spur Award for the best novel set in the West, the Navajo Tribe’s Special Friend Award, the National Media Award from the American Anthropological Association, the Public Service Award from the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière.

His most recent body of work is a three-book deal that includes his 2001 memoir, *Seldom Disappointed*, for which he won the Agatha Award for Best Non-Fiction, *The Wailing Wind* and a work in progress titled *The Sinister Pig*. “The book is about what pig launchers—the tools that are used to clean out and check pipelines—are used for when the pipelines have been abandoned when, say, a copper smelter shuts down or the company gets gobbled up by another company. That’s all I can tell you,” he says, examining a map on his desk of Mexico and southwestern New Mexico, where

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Tony Hillerman and Marie Unzer met as seniors at OU. Tony describes his marriage to Marie on August 16, 1948, as “the greatest coup of his life.” The Hillermans’ daughter Anne was born in Lawton; after moving to New Mexico, they adopted two more daughters and three sons and now have 10 grandchildren.

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Tony Hillerman, center, joins fellow authors Studs Terkel, left, and Scott Turow, laughing at their own witticisms at a library fund-raising event.

*The Sinister Pig* takes place. “It’s not just Joe Leaphorn who’s always studying maps—it’s me, too. For this new book, I have to go back down there and look at the landscape. I need to have the landscape in mind when I’m writing.”

His landscapes also come from his life experiences, as do many of the characters and story lines that make his novels uniquely Hillerman. “Yesterday, I was on the elevator to go see a doctor about getting my cataracts removed,” he says. “I met a couple: a thin, well-dressed black woman, about 5 feet 4 inches, with a man of about the same height who, if you were casting a movie, would be the tugboat skipper—ruddy skin, bright blue eyes, well-trimmed beard and hair and a cap that had to be European. I chatted with them—I talk to everybody, you know—and thought, ‘I’ll remember them when describing characters in a future book.’ ”

He also gets ideas for characters from readers. “One woman who worked for the Customs Service and the Treasury Department suggested I get one of my Navajo characters into the Border Patrol as a tracker known as a Shadow Wolf. I’m going to use that in my new book.”

He claims he never really wanted to write a memoir and certainly never had entertained the prospect of writing one as part of a multi-book contract. “Usually I just write books and send them off,” he says. “But another publisher had approached me, and my publisher wanted me to sign the deal for three books. He said he would pay me [well] to do it. So I said, ‘OK.’ ”

The title of the memoir comes from words often spoken by his mother: “Blessed are those who expect little; they are seldom disappointed.” The first time he recalled hearing them was when one hot summer day his father was lugging an enormous, luscious Black Diamond watermelon to the house. But in the intense heat and humidity, the melon slipped from his grasp as he tried to open the gate latch. “At some level in my psyche, I must have sensed that this Black Diamond was too good to be true,” he wrote more than 70 years later. “I must have mentioned this to Mama when she was comforting us kids, because it’s the first time I recall hearing her favorite aphorism. . . . Looking back at life, I find I have often received more than I ever expected and suffered less than my share of disappointments.”

After all his success, fame and even a bit of fortune, Hillerman still does not have high expectations. And, despite suffering from arthritis, cataracts and nagging war injuries, and with a bout with cancer behind him, he is not disappointed all that often. At age 77, he continues to do what he loves best—write. “How can you stop writing?” he asks.

Fans all over the world must be glad he feels that way. 🍷