



Book signing, discussion for ‘Tony Hillerman: A Life’

The Navajo Nation is a region that one author thought was rich with story potential, an author whose name has, for better or worse, become synonymous with the region: Tony Hillerman.

After his first novel, “The Blessing Way,” was published in 1970, Hillerman went on to write 17 additional volumes chronicling the cases of Navajo Tribal Police detectives Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee.

The books were both critical and commercial successes, earning Hillerman an Edgar Award and a distinction as a “Grand Master of Crime Fiction” by the Mystery Writers of America. By the time of his passing in 2008, more than 20 million copies of his books existed in print.

Today, the stories of his characters live on through the works of his daughter, Anne Hillerman, who has to date written six more bestsellers.

But despite the acclaim Hillerman’s work garnered, they were not without controversy. Hillerman was an Anglo writing about Navajo characters and describing the intricacies of Navajo culture. There were numerous complaints about cultural appropriation throughout his career.

ABOUT THE BIOGRAPHY

Yet, there are people who will stand up for Hillerman, saying he honored the Navajo people and culture through his work. One of those is biographer James McGrath Morris.

Morris has previously written about authors including Ernest Hemingway and Joseph Pulitzer, and recently published his sixth biography. His subject is Southwest author Tony Hillerman. The book is entitled "Tony Hillerman: A Life."

Morris takes readers on a journey through Hillerman's life. The biography follows him from his youth in Oklahoma during the Great Depression to his near-death experience and the ensuing trauma of World War II. It takes the reader into Hillerman's family life with his wife of sixty years and their six children, then explores his career as a journalist and his trip to the Southwest where he became one of the most recognized mystery fiction writers in America. Morris has been hailed for giving a balanced, yet intimate look at the subject.

Gallup residents got to hear firsthand accounts of putting the book together when Morris spoke at Octavia Fellin Public Library Dec. 8. The visit was marked by a discussion with readers and Morris, and followed by a book signing.

"We were thrilled to see so many familiar faces in the audience, including local and national authors, City of Gallup executive staff, and fans of James McGrath Morris and Tony Hillerman at the signing," Tammi Moe, Director of Octavia Fellin Library, said the next day.

WHAT'S IN THE BOOK?

Readers will learn about how his dive into journalism at the University of New Mexico would lead Hillerman to take a crack at the 'Great American Novel.'

Readers may also be reminded of things about Hillerman's characters that they have forgotten if they have not reread the books recently. For instance the now-iconic Joe Leaphorn was not the actual protagonist of Hillerman's first book, "The Blessing Way." Rather, it was a Caucasian anthropologist who was investigating the crime that had been committed, and Leaphorn was originally intended to be a side character.

But when it came time for Hillerman to write the second entry in his Navajo Nation-set series, he moved to make Leaphorn a main character. This move would become one of the most impactful decisions in the world of mystery fiction.

As the book points out, protagonists who solved crimes on the page were generally Caucasian detectives in urban environments. The introduction of Hillerman's books throughout the 1970s, several of which were adapted into made-for-TV movies in the late 1990s, showed readers and viewers a crime-solver with dark skin investigating and solving crimes set on a rural Native reservation.

Despite claims that Hillerman appropriated Navajo culture, and additional criticism that he profited and did not return his share to the Navajo people, the book credits Hillerman for introducing many readers to Navajo culture through an informed, respectful lens.

MOVING AHEAD

With Anne Hillerman continuing the stories of Leaphorn and Chee in recent books, as well as a new adaptation of “Dark Winds” in production for AMC and set to broadcast sometime in 2022, it is clear the works of Tony Hillerman will endure.

This is particularly true when there are authors like Morris who want to examine the subtleties of the author and give readers more insight into his established, significant works.

“We were truly honored to have this prominent figure in the literary world and a captivating storyteller take the audience on a journey through the process of biographical writing,” Moe said. “The evening passed much too quickly and left the audience wanting more.”

For more information on James McGrath Morris, including his previous biographies, visit:
<https://jamesmcgrathmorris.com/>

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