The Blessing Way Short Guide

The Blessing Way by Tony Hillerman

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

Because the Navajo Leaphorn has studied anthropology in a "white" university setting, he bridges the gap between the traditional Native American culture in which he lives and works and the more modern— if not, perhaps, advanced, to Hillerman's way of thinking —Anglo-American culture of the twentieth century with which most readers are more familiar. Bridging this gap is vitally important to the story, as Leaphorn's knowledge of Navajo culture allows him to solve the mystery and save his long-time friend's life. Leaphorn constantly strives to balance his own identity as a law enforcement official—and thus part of a whiteestablished bureaucracy—with his Navajo ancestry. An accomplished tracker, Leaphorn displays an almost Holmesian power of observation particularly appropriate to both his Navajo background and his law enforcement profession.

Luis Horseman, the murder victim, illustrates the loss of Navajo cultural heritage and the potential for personal consequences of this loss. Horseman understands only some of the old ways, and turns to them for safety when it becomes clear that he is in danger. However, he has forgotten many of the old Navajo chants that would make his survival in the wilderness more likely, at least in his belief. Hillerman does not state, or even imply, that Horseman could have saved himself if he had studied the old ways more diligently; however, Horseman is clearly denied in his final days the peace that he might have found had he more confidence in the chants and rituals of protection and provision that he performed. As Joe Leaphorn himself says, Horseman was "Just another poor soul who didn't quite know how to be Navajo and couldn't learn to act like a white. No good for anything."

Again, Hillerman does not seem to prefer Navajo culture to white; he seems, rather, to prefer some culture, particularly a culture with a basis in metaphysical beliefs, to no culture at all.

Like Horseman, George "Big Navajo" Jackson has lost touch with his Navajo heritage due to his relocation to California at an early age. Whereas Horseman turns to the old ways for comfort in time of stress and fear, Jackson only knows about the Navajo Way from what he has read in books, and sees this knowledge as something to be used for personal advantage. Thus, he demonstrates no interest in cultural knowledge for its own sake, but sees it as a tool for gain, and his masquerading as a hated and feared Navajo Wolf—a witch with the power to transform himself, like a werewolf—demonstrates how far from his own culture he has actually drifted.

Dr. Bergen McKee leaves the world of academia behind to investigate reports of Navajo witchcraft—his specific area of academic study. Like Jackson, he lends no credence to the concept of actual witchcraft, but views the ability to apply the term "witch" as a societal tool to allow the Navajos a vent for their frustration against someone who has violated cultural norms.

Also like Jackson, McKee seeks to use the cultural belief in witchcraft for his own gain—in his case, as the basis for a published study of such incidents. The difference, of course, is that Jackson uses these beliefs against those who hold them, whereas McKee's approach is benign, or condescending at worst.

Finally, Ellen Leon appears in what many might see as an essentially passive or passive-aggressive role, at least early in the novel. Not believing there to be any rational cause for McKee's fear of Jackson, she fakes an injury to avoid the walking escape route that McKee has planned. She is, in fact, responsible for their capture by Jackson.

However, she also becomes at least partially responsible for their escape, for in the epilogue we learn that Leaphorn is able to reach McKee in time to save his life because Leon has thought to start a signal fire with the camping equipment of their captors—a device that McKee probably should have thought of, but did not.

Social Concerns

Tony Hillerman, born and raised among Native Americans in Oklahoma, claims to have read practically everything ever written about Navajo history, and to have learned even more about the culture and tradition of "The People" through his years of friendship and interaction with Navajos in New Mexico, where he now lives. His inclusion of effective detail regarding Navajo culture throughout The Blessing Way leads one to believe these claims readily. Hillerman addresses the concerns of the Navajo in particular, and the Native American in general, from a vantage point unattainable, or at least unattained, by most other Anglo Americans. That Navajo Law and Order Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn can successfully operate among a variety of cultures, including white, Hispanic, Navajo, and other Native Americans, indicates Hillerman's optimistic view that a variety of cultures can peacefully, even profitably, co-exist.

As The Blessing Way makes obvious, Hillerman is concerned about the loss of the Navajo culture and way of life as more and more Navajos become increasingly assimilated into the dominant Anglo culture.

Although he carefully avoids over-sentimentality concerning this loss, Hillerman demonstrates the preferability of the old ways over the new in numerous places throughout the text. As with most detective fiction, the detective favors the conservative aspects of society, seeking only to restore the status quo, rather than make any fundamental changes to that society. However, with only a few minor exceptions, Hillerman does not portray the Anglo way of life as wrong or evil; rather, he simply seems to wish that multiple cultures could more successfully co-exist.

Closely related to his concern with preserving culture is Hillerman's concern with racism. Lieutenant Leaphorn has studied anthropology at college, and, in a sense, his work in law enforcement continues that study. His characters generally engage in no overt displays of racist language, and Hillerman thus demonstrates the often subtle nature of prejudice and its effects on interpersonal relationships—particularly in terms of exploitation and general distrust of others, both of which evidence themselves in George "Big Navajo" Jackson's use of the Navajo Wolf legends to frighten Navajos from the site of his work. This distrust also appears, for example, in questions of legal jurisdiction, which is so complicated on and near the reservation that cases are often dismissed due to a total inability to determine under what law a matter should be tried. Hillerman, a selfproclaimed Jeffersonian, thus pits individuals (usually Native American) against the system (usually portrayed as white) and even demonstrates the futility and the foolishness of the system by pitting it against itself.

Techniques

Hillerman often highlights the long history of the Native American cultures that inhabit the southwest setting of the novel by describing the effects of the long passage of time on the landscape. These same descriptions, admirable examples of Hillerman's craft in their own right, also point to the apparent difference in significance between man and nature—if nature, being so large and diverse, can remain in harmony with itself, there exists a certain irony in the fact that humanity so often can remain in harmony neither with itself nor with nature. In fact, setting almost takes on the role of another character, albeit a whimsical one, the dry climate sometimes aiding in Leaphorn's tracking, the rain at other times washing away what could be important clues.

Hillerman generally shows, rather than tells. He never seems "teachy" or "preachy" in his writing, and therefore his writing appeals to a broader audience of readers unlikely to read about Native American culture in anthropological or ethnographical texts. Generally, Hillerman provides very little explanation of the various cultural aspects that occur in The Blessing Way, assuming that a reasonably intelligent reader will pay close enough attention to the text to understand at least the broad points necessary to follow the plot. As Joe Leaphorn himself is often learning about the culture along with the reader, this technique both piques reader interest and curiosity while at the same time enabling the reader to identify more closely with the protagonist.

Themes

Lieutenant Leaphorn works for the Law and Order Division of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Ironically, as in much modern detective fiction, the representative of law and order seems much more concerned to see that he serves order, rather than law. Moreover, the Navajo Way is concerned primarily with balance, and with maintaining the harmony that exists as a result of the interconnectedness, and interdependency, of all things. Thus, as a detective, Leaphorn serves not only the cause of justice, but the very basis of Navajo culture itself, by restoring order to a society unbalanced by crime and death.

Alienation is perhaps Hillerman's strongest theme in The Blessing Way. Each of the four major male characters in the novel feels alienated from his culture in some way, and the only woman character of any importance in the novel—Ellen Leon— becomes increasingly alienated from her fiance as the plot progresses, until she suspects him of murder near the end of the novel. However, Hillerman stresses that, while alienation in and of itself is a negative aspect of human existence that should be avoided when possible, it is the individual reaction to this situation that is important.

The Navajo people, for instance, live fairly isolated lives, with each family generally living miles away from its closest neighbors, yet "The People" retain at least some sense of cultural identity. Additionally, Leaphorn uses his dual existence in both the Native American and the Anglo American worlds both to his benefit and to the benefit of society in general and Navajo society in particular, using what he has learned from each to his advantage. George "Big Navajo" Jackson, in contrast, becomes corrupted at least in part due to his separation from his homeland, his people, and his unguarded exposure to Anglo culture, and has chosen a criminal lifestyle.

Adaptations

HarperCollins published an abridged version of The Blessing Way, read by the author, on two cassette tapes in 1989 and Harper Audio reissued the set in 1990.

Key Questions

Hillerman's interest in the American Southwest, an area of vast differences in climate, topography, and culture, evidences itself clearly in The Blessing Way, as well as in much of his other work. Much of his writing seems to involve his own working out of the essential conflict between the need for harmony and the need to choose between competing cultures. Throughout his writing, however, wherever Hillerman is critical, it is of individual choices, rarely of cultural values.

1. Many people might agree with the statement that only when an individual becomes comfortable within his or her own culture can the effort be made to understand and accept other cultures.

Does Hillerman seem to agree or disagree with this statement?

2. George "Big Navajo" Jackson has been raised apart from his people, and has therefore not learned the Navajo Way.

Is it this separation from "The People" that is to be blamed for his criminal behavior, or something else? Has Jackson embraced Anglo culture, or is he without a culture?

3. Hillerman combines aspects of the police procedural, the hard-boiled detective novel, the western, the frontier novel and the ethnography, to name only some, in The Blessing Way. How should this novel be categorized? Is such categorization important? Why?

4. At the climax of the novel, Bergen McKee finds himself isolated and outnumbered, with a potential love interest about whom he feels protective. He has virtually no tools or weapons at his disposal. What does McKee's reaction to this situation say about Hillerman's definition of manhood? Is McKee's near fatal wounding significant?

5. What is Ellen Leon's role in the novel?

Is she essentially passive, or naive, or something else? Does her character develop during the course of the novel?

If so, how?

6. One of Hillerman's most important themes is alienation, and each of the four major male characters is the novel— Leaphorn, McKee, Jackson, and Horseman—appears alienated from his own culture in some way. What brings this alienation about in each of these character's lives, and how does it affect them?

7. How does Hillerman's inclusion of traditional Navajo beliefs add to the story?

Would a greater understanding of these beliefs on the part of the reader add to, or detract from, the reading of the novel?

8. McKee has killed two men during the course of the novel, but only in fact, not "officially." Should McKee stand trial for the deaths of these two men? What does Leaphorn's agreement to conceal McKee's involvement in these deaths say about his abilities or interests as a law enforcement officer?

9. How is American government portrayed in The Blessing Way? What, if anything, does Hillerman seem to be saying about government in general?

10. Tony Hillerman has stated that he works "from the presumption that people buy mysteries for entertainment" (The Armchair Detective). Nonetheless, his novels clearly attempt to inform, even to persuade, as well as simply to entertain. Is such a use of the mystery genre honest, or should the author inform his readers of agenda if he has one of which he is aware?

Literary Precedents

One might say that, as an "ethnic detective," Joe Leaphorn traces his roots all the way back to the first detective fiction, Edgar Allan Poe's tales of ratiocination featuring the French detective C. Auguste Dupin.

However, Joe Leaphorn brings cultural understanding to the law enforcement profession in a much more realistic and meaningful manner than did Poe's Frenchman or, say, than Earl Derr Biggers' detective Charlie Chan brought any type of Asian sensibility to the job of solving crimes. Nonetheless, Hillerman certainly follows in the footsteps of such ethnic detective writers as Biggers or the more critically acclaimed Arthur Upfield or Chester Himes.

But Hillerman has combined elements of many genres and sub-genres in his fiction.

Certainly, by setting his story against the backdrop of the Southwest and including such themes as survival against the odds in the wild, Hillerman borrows from both the western novel of such writers as Louis L'Amour and the frontier novel of James Fenimore Cooper and the like. As a detective and suspense writer, Hillerman clearly follows in the footsteps of such authors as Eric Ambler, Graham Greene, and Raymond Chandler, all of whom he cited as influences in a 1987 interview with The Armchair Detective. Joe Leaphorn, however, is more complex than many of his detective predecessors due to his dual heritage and its impact on his working environment, particularly his metaphysical approach to the world (by which Hillerman might also be read as a "religious detective" writer such as G. K. Chesterson or E. V. Cunningham). Moreover, his work often resembles the police procedural as popularized by Ed McBain (Evan Hunter), particularly as it refers to jurisdictional disagreements and the involvement of the personal life of Leaphorn (such as his relationship with McKee and his own Navajo upbringing) in his professional life.

Related Titles

The Blessing Way introduces Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, a character who returns in a number of Hillerman novels. In Dancehall of the Dead (1973), often considered one of Hillerman's best mysteries, Leaphorn returns to solve a mystery involving a Navajo youth who is seeking initiation into the Zuni people, and must deal with an absurdly complicated law enforcement bureaucracy as well as his own personal prejudices against the Zuni and the FBI. Listening Woman (1977) again highlights the cultural differences between Native American people groups and the need for understanding to overcome those differences. (The following year, Hillerman introduced Jim Chee, another Navajo officer of the Law and Order Division of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in The People of Darkness (1978). He would return in The Dark Wind (1981) and Ghostway (1984) before appearing alongside Leaphorn in later Hillerman mysteries.)

Chee and Leaphorn first appear together in 1985's A Thief of Time, also generally considered one of Hillerman's best works, in which they investigate illegal digging and sales of archaeological finds. The spiritual Chee and the practical Leaphorn gradually develop their relationship and respect for each other in Skinwalkers (1986), in which they investigate a series of murders on and around the Navajo reservation. Leaphorn and Chee must cope with personal as well as professional difficulties in Talking God (1989), in which Hillerman again clearly speaks out against archaeology as a profitbased venture. Hillerman unmistakably illustrates the roles of these two Navajo policemen as defenders of organization against chaos, as well as the ultimate futility of such efforts, in Coyote Waits (1990). Love interests and jurisdictional conflicts against complicate the protagonists' law enforcement work in Sacred Clowns (1993), where they investigate murders involving the theft of a sacred religious item.

Leaphorn returns from retirement to assist acting Lieutenant Chee in the investigation of an 11-year-old death on a mountain considered sacred by the Navajos in The Fallen Man (1996). Leaphorn emerges from this semi-retirement again, this time as a private investigator, in The First Eagle (1998), wherein he searches for a connection between a missing health department worker and the murder of a Navajo Tribal Police officer working under Jim Chee. Finally, often cited as one of the better novels in the latter part of the series, Hunting Badger (1999) involves an inquiry into a casino robbery, based in part on a real-life investigative fiasco led by the FBI in 1998.

Hillerman has also published a number of other works about the Southwest, Native American culture, or both. These include The Boy Who Made Dragonfly: A Zuni Myth (1972), The Great Taos Bank Robbery and Other Indian Country Affairs (1980), Indian Country: America's Sacred Land (1987), Hillerman Country: A Journey through the Southwest with Tony Hillerman (1991) and New Mexico, Rio Grande, and Other Essays (1992).

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