

# Coyote Waits Short Guide

## Coyote Waits by Tony Hillerman

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# Contents

<a href="#">Coyote Waits Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>

# Characters

Lt. Joe Leaphorn and Officer Jim Chee appear for the fourth time as an awkwardly-paired team in *Coyote Waits*. More accustomed to working together by this time, they have each learned to adjust to the other's very different methods and point of view.

Janet Pete, home from Washington and working in Albuquerque with the reservation legal system, seems well on her way to becoming a permanent part of Hillerman's cast of characters in the Navajo novels. Her relationship with Jim Chee is growing, although their association is still marked by some distrust and awkwardness. Once again, they clash when Janet is assigned to defend the elderly Navajo who quite clearly appears to be guilty of shooting Chee's friend and colleague, Officer Delbert Nez.

Professor Louisa Bourebonette, anthropologist and longtime friend of Ashie Pinto, who has been arrested for the Nez murder, at first irritates Leaphorn who feels initially that she is interfering with matters that should concern only Pinto's clan. He soon grows to respect the professor for her astute observations and for her clear respect for Native American culture, and gradually he begins to spend time with her, taking her with him on some of his official investigations into the Pinto case.

*Coyote Waits* is a gallery of Hillerman's characterizations: William Odell Redd, struggling graduate student and owner of a rusty Bronco II with a license tag that reads "REDDNEK"; Ashie Pinto who "walks with the steady, unhurried pace of a man who has walked great distances, who will walk great distances more"; Jay Kennedy, FBI agent permanently exiled to the Southwest for not conforming completely to Bureau notions of appropriate lifestyle and behavior; Huan Ji, high school math teacher whose former life as a Vietnamese colonel is still evident in the military precision of his gray slacks and blue jacket. The novel is peopled with interesting characters, some who appear only briefly, others whose roles are more substantial, and all of whom are sharply delineated in Hillerman's concise description.

## Social Concerns

As he does in the earlier *Talking God* (1989), Hillerman uses an ethical question as the starting point for *Coyote Waits*, a compelling mystery set in Navajo Country. Once again he raises the issue of the conflict between the demands of academic research and the restrictions and taboos of ethnic cultures. In this novel, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee are back in the familiar territory of the Southwest. However, their investigations carry them beyond reservation boundaries and into the academic community of a major state university, away from the carefully structured modes of behavior among the diné. The cut-throat world of scholarly research is populated by those who will stop at nothing—even murder—in order to garner information that might lead to an important article or a book.

As the mystery unravels, it becomes clear that Ashie Pinto, the elderly man accused of the murder of Officer Delbert Nez, was acting under the influence of whiskey. A recovering alcoholic, Pinto was supplied with whiskey by the unscrupulous Professor Tagert in an attempt to force Pinto to retell a series of tales indicating that Butch Cassidy's body—along with the loot from his last robbery—is buried somewhere on the reservation. Unbeknownst to Tagert, his graduate assistant Odell Redd has other plans for the contents of the mailbag they have discovered by the skeleton that Tagert believes to be Cassidy's remains. Ultimately, Chee and Leaphorn must deal with not one but three deaths that can be linked to Tagert's obsession with academic recognition and Redd's festering resentment at the poverty and lack of respect he has endured as Tagert's research assistant.



## Techniques

As he does in his other books, Hillerman both informs and entertains through *Coyote Waits*. An academic and popular historian himself, Hillerman deftly weaves into his tale a great deal of information about academic politics — particularly in the field of American history — and about Navajo culture and the American Southwest. Through Leaphorn and Chee, the Navajo custom of careful listening is juxtaposed with the impatience displayed by those characters whose roots are in the white man's culture; and through Leaphorn and Chee, the reader listens to Odell Redd discuss traditional historians of the West and their scholarly quarrels with the proponents of revisionist historicism.

*Coyote Waits* is driven by an entertaining and multistranded plot that weaves together a number of seemingly separate stories: a policeman looking for vandals, a professor determined to discover Butch Cassidy's body, a case of adolescent infatuation, and a ruthless money-making scheme. Underlying in the novel are Jim Chee's continuing attempt to forge a relationship with Janet Pete and Joe Leaphorn's slow recovery from his grief over Emma's death.

Hillerman's villains in this novel are—like those in his earlier mysteries and those in many other crime novels—people whose obsessions have driven them far beyond the bounds of redemption. Tagert and Redd's lack of human compassion is perhaps exacerbated by their long association with each other. They are alienated from their peers, emotionally incapable of reacting to anything save their own personal goals, and devoid of all identification with true humanity.



## Key Questions

Hillerman's novels tend to be fun to discuss, and *Coyote Waits* is no exception. The interaction of cultures is particularly interesting in *Coyote Waits*; this time, instead of plundering Native American graves, the academic community, represented by Tagert and Redd, wants to plunder the remains of a white bandit. Even so, cultural attitudes about the dead continue to differ, as in *Talking God* and other novels, furthermore, Chee finds his attitudes tested when faced with the murder of a colleague by a Native American. His difficulties with the case internalize in him the very difficult problem of establishing a balanced view of the relationship between Navajo culture and outsiders.

1. Chee and Leaphorn appear together for their fourth book in *Coyote Waits*, yet they appeared separately in earlier books. Which are better, the ones in which they appear apart from each other or the ones in which they appear together? Why is this?

2. Who is the more interesting character, Chee or Leaphorn?

3. Does the academic mystery succeed in being original, or have you seen this plot device before?

4. How promising is Leaphorn's relationship with Louisa Bourebonette?

What about her appeals to him? What about him appeals to her? Has Leaphorn recovered enough from the death of his wife to have a new romantic relationship?

5. Why would Leaphorn want to leave his work?

6. To what use would Tagert put Cassidy's remains? Is this a good use?

What would Redd do with the remains?

7. In *Coyote Waits*, how well does the academic world understand the Navajo? How do Chee and Leaphorn deal with misunderstandings?

8. Chee's biases seem to be severely tested by the murder case of Delbert Nez. Does he learn anything about himself from the case? How does it affect his relationship with Pete?

9. *Coyote Waits* poses a few acute ethical dilemmas. What are they? How important are they to the plot and to the resolution of the novel? How are they resolved?

10. How well do Leaphorn and Chee function outside of their familiar landscape?

## Literary Precedents

Hillerman creates an intriguing tale that incorporates elements of several detective subgenres: the police procedural, the academic intrigue, and Hillerman's own by-now-established ethnocultural mystery. Like classic detective fiction, *Coyote Waits* details a puzzling crime that yields its answers only to the superior deductive powers of its protagonists. Featuring a suspenseful plot, a pair of cunning academic villains, and two resourceful and intelligent policemen, Hillerman's novel provides a new twist on a familiar genre: the identity of Delbert Nez's killer is immediately obvious — but not why or how the policeman's death was effected, and Leaphorn and Chee must discover both motive and opportunity before any convictions can be made.

Like the academic mysteries of Edmund Crispin and Amanda Cross, *Coyote Waits* reveals much about scholarly politics and professional jealousy in the educational community. Hillerman exposes the extreme lengths to which scholars occasionally go in order to pursue their research unimpeded.



## Related Titles

Coyote Waits opens with Chee's discovery of the shooting death of Delbert Nez, a friend and fellow policeman, and a character who has appeared in earlier Hillerman novels. Chee arrests the obvious suspect and precipitates another setback in his slowly developing relationship with Janet Pete, who is assigned to defend the suspect.

Still mourning the death of his wife Emma, and disillusioned with the lack of challenge in his career, Joe Leaphorn is beginning to contemplate retirement and a trip somewhere — to China or some other place equally exotic. His ennui terminates with the murder of Delbert Nez, and he embarks on an investigation that introduces him to Professor Louisa Bourebonette, a pleasant middle-aged academic who first irritates and then intrigues Leaphorn.

Detailed reference is made to the Blessing Way ceremony that Jim Chee has performed for Joe Leaphorn. Leaphorn commissioned the younger man's services at the end of a difficult case described in an earlier novel, in an attempt both to ease his own grief at his wife's death and to give Chee a chance to practice his new vocation.

Appearing in this novel as in earlier ones are two always interesting characters. Captain Largo, Jim Chee's immediate superior, is again forced to deal with his frustration at the activities of his maverick officer; old John McGinnis, proprietor of the Short Mountain Trading post, returns as a ready source of information on the activities of the inhabitants of the far reaches of the reservation.





# Copyright Information

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