The First Eagle Short Guide

The First Eagle 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

Hillerman populates the novel with a rich cast of characters whom he reveals through their speech, their actions, and their thoughts. He also describes their physical appearance so that readers form specific and distinguishing images of them. Jim Chee is portrayed as a "traditional" Navajo who has studied to become a hatathali, a traditional singer who can conduct traditional curing rituals; he is also a universityeducated (University of Arizona) lawman as is his former supervisor, now retired, Joe Leaphorn (Arizona State University). The relationship between the two is complicated and thus interesting. Chee has worked with "the Legendary Lieutenant" in the past and respects him highly, but he is not yet completely comfortable with Leaphorn.

However, in light of Leaphorn's new status as a private investigator, "just Mr. Leaphorn now" and Chee's as Acting Lieutenant in charge of the Tuba City office, they work on a more equal footing, developing chains of inference together and tracing their consequences. As a result their relationship grows into the deeper friendship of equals.

As the two point-of-view characters, they reveal their thought processes through conversation with each other and with other characters as well as through free indirect discourse. As his relationship with Louisa Bourebonette, a continuing character, develops, Leaphorn discovers in her intelligent can-do attitude and sturdy cheerfulness a companion who is able to ease the aching loneliness from which he has suffered since his wife's death. He finds himself discussing the investigation with her much as did with his beloved Emma. Janet Pete, on the other hand, provides no such "surcease" from loneliness for Jim Chee.

Another continuing character, Pete appears not to be an appropriate companion for Chee. The obstacles in the way of their relationship, as it becomes increasingly apparent to Chee, have more to do with her character than with her desire for urban bright lights. A third romantic interest is hinted at in the form of Officer Bernadette Manuelito who is much more interested in Chee than he is in her—for the time being at least.

Hillerman's villains are often intelligent and well educated but usually suffer from an advanced case of hubris. Dr. Albert Woody is no exception. He is on a wellfinanced expedition to discover how to save mankind from the deadly viruses and bacteria such as the Hantavirus and Yersinia Pestis. Obsessed with the search—and with the fame and respect if not wealth that will be his if he can successfully conclude his search—he brooks no interference with his protected rodent populations. A talent for friendly persuasion seems not to be his so that when a headstrong worker for the Navajo Health Services, Catherine Pollard, sets out to make her part of the reservation safe from vectors of such "deadly beasties" as Yersinia pestis, Woody murders her and then Officer Kinsman, who has seen Woody burying Pollard because "I can't let anything interfere with this' [the work of his lab" (264).

Hillerman's talent for deft characterization by direct speech and narrated action is apparent in the portraits he paints of not only his main characters but also a number of secondary figures. Louisa Bourebonette and Janet Pete are painted more fully as befits their status as continuing characters who have appeared in earlier novels such as A Thief of Time. He describes the physical appearance of each of these important women distinguishing each in terms of age and appearance, speech, and occupation, but most importantly by contrasting their relationships with Leaphorn and Chee.

Bourebonette's relationship with Leaphorn is helpful, equal, and respectful. Hillerman draws Pete's relationship with Chee, however, as distrustful, unequal, antagonistic, and ultimately, one feels, likely to be, if continued, destructive. He sketches his other characters with enough detail and depth to distinguish them one from the other but not to interfere with the forward movement of the narrative.

Social Concerns

Tony Hillerman has been involved with Native American culture from his childhood in Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma, to his present-day position living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, as dean of mystery writers and devotee of Navajo, Hopi, and Kiowa cultures. His respect for these rich Indian cultures of the American Southwest not only has won him a huge and devoted readership, it has also been acknowledged by a plaque presented him by the Navajo Tribal Council declaring him a "Special Friend Of The Dineh" as "an expression of appreciation and friendship for authentically portraying the strength and dignity of traditional Navajo culture." The Navajos and a good many other tribes use his books in their schools. His authentic knowledge of and respect for the Navajo culture has informed a significant body of fiction including First Eagle, published in 1998. In it, he has again brought together his two memorable continuing characters, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, both of the Navajo Tribal Police. His belief that aspects of ancient Indian ways are still very much alive and are highly germane to the broader society of the United States informs this work as it has over a dozen of his well-crafted mysteries.

His background in Navajo culture began when he returned with a head full of memories from his first encounter with Navajos in July, 1945. Just home from WWII on a convalescent furlough, he ran into what he calls some "us" kind of people, "kindred spirits" around whom he felt comfortable, country folks like himself, "poor but not letting it bother them much." He had been hired to haul a truckload of oil well equipment from Oklahoma City to a well site near Crownpoint and had seen a little of an "Enemy Way" ceremonial, in which friends, family, and neighbors came in to restore a Navajo Marine back from the Pacific ("a just-returned serviceman like myself)" to "beauty with his people and cured of the disharmony of exposure to foreign cultures" (Hillerman and Bulow, Talking Mysteries, p. 25).

Part of the appeal of his fiction in general and The First Eagle in particular is that he builds a strong social and cultural foundation out of contemporary social issues—for example, law enforcement and its dangers and other difficulties—as they emerge in Navajo country in the context of the mys tery to be solved. In this novel the team of Jim Chee, Acting Lieutenant, and Joe Leaphorn, now retired from the Navajo Tribal Police and working as a private investigator but still in many ways "the Legendary Lieutenant," work to solve the disappearance of Catherine Pollard and the murder of Benjamin Kinsman. Pollard was a "flea-catcher" for the Arizona Health Department. Benjamin Kinsman was an officer of the Navajo Tribal Police, but he seems to have been involved in several instances of sexual harassment as well as fighting with a man in the company of Catherine Pollard, known as a strong-willed and very independent woman. In the course of their investigations, Chee and Leaphorn, individually and collectively, enter contexts in which the means of counteracting the spread of antibiotic-resistant Yersinia pestis is sought. The "miracle drugs" of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s no longer can protect humanity because our cultural misuse of them has bred resistant strains of deadly bacteria.

Although antibiotics have never worked on viruses, people have sought them for viral infections and all too often received them, unwittingly nurturing the survival of antibiotic-resistant microbes. Thus, an important part of the triple plot of The First Eagle hinges on the efforts of Dr. Albert Woody, employed officially as a researcher for the National Institutes of Health but also apparently by several big pharmaceutical companies, to "save all of humanity" from "the little beasties." Here it is not the NIH that's being attacked but rather the hubris and ambition of Dr. Woody.

A second social issue and one related to the second plot element centers on the role of the Federal Bureau of Investigation— always a target in Hillerman's Navajo fiction— and the problems that occur when political ambition drives the decisions made in a criminal investigation and prosecution. Special prosecutors and FBI Agents-In-Charge appear with very few exceptions as arrogant, inept ("The Federal Bureau of Ineptitude" as Chee calls them [233]), guided by political ambitions, and all too often poor investigators. The relationship between Tribal Police and the FBI are problematic at best because the Federal Government has placed overall authority for investigating capital crimes on Indian Reservations in the hands of the FBI. A central theme in all of Hillerman's "Navajo" fiction involves the genuine disrespect most "real" lawmen in Arizona and New Mexico have for the FBI— and how the agency has "earned" that disrespect. The plot of First Eagle develops this issue in the persons of Acting Assistant U.S.

Attorney J. D. Mickey, a politically ambitious newcomer to the Arizona political scene, Special Agent In Charge John Reynald and his assistant Agent Edgar Evans.

A third social issue comprises another significant part of the novel's underlying cultural context. It involves the complex historical conflict between Navajo and Hopi tribes over lands and resources. For several reasons, this strand provides an important and plausible revenge motive in Acting Lieutenant Jim Chee's mind for arresting Robert Jano, a Hopi, for the murder of Officer Kinsman. First of all, Kinsman had previously arrested Jano for poaching eagles. But, as Chee had been aware, Officer Kinsman harbored strong anti-Hopi feelings because "his family's home site [had been added] to the Hopi Reservation when Congress split the Joint Use lands" (15) with the 1974 Navajo-Hopi Relocation Act.

Assigning ownership to a tribe made it legal for tribal leadership to issue leases to mining companies, such as Peabody Coal.

The Hopi had always opposed coal mining on the tribe's reservation land, but the Navajos were in favor of it. Thus, the Act made it possible for the Navajos to sell mining leases that led to the exploitation of the land's natural resources including its abundant coal as well as its quite scarce water. Yells Back Butte, a part of Black Mesa and the scene of Kinsman's murder, is in the novel a traditional part of the Hopi spiritual homeland even though the federal government had added it to the Navajo Reservation in 1974 precisely to permit the exploration of the area for mining purposes. Hillerman compresses all of this history of the tribal contest over Yells Back Butte by making it the place where Hopi men catch eagles for use in their traditional ceremonies . The place is

thus quite important to them spiritually. Hillerman solidly grounds his novel on these social issues, historical facts, and tribal rituals, but he merely alludes to them, allowing the interested reader the pleasure of reconstructing them from his hints. In many ways, while the significant cluster of themes revolving around the enmity between the two groups results not merely because they belong to two quite distinct racial groups, the motive for revenge for past acts goes back no further than to the confiscation of Navajo lands by whites after Kit Carson forced the Navajos to Bosque Redondo in southeast New Mexico, a death march for many of the tribe.

When the survivors returned they had been allowed to settle on land regarded traditionally by the Hopi as theirs.

Techniques

Hillerman deploys a seasoned array of competent and economical narrative strategies to tell his story. He divides his book into 28 chapters, each of which comprises a particular "thematic beat," a cluster of tightly related cognitive, speech, and physical actions that advance the overall plot. The First Eagle is an excellent example of how he weaves together a set of social issues and connects them with the governing theme of detection that manifests itself in three forms:

the scientific search to discover ways to defeat the microbes that could destroy all mankind; second, the search for the killer of Officer Kinsman and for the missing Catherine Pollard; and third, the search by both Chee and Leaphorn for love and companionship. The first and third of these themes involve various "back story" explanations and are expressed either with direct dramatic representations in scenes or by free indirect discourse (see below).

Hillerman narrates this tale from an omniscient narrative point of view limited, however, by his penetrating the thoughts of only Chee and Leaphorn. The result is a seemingly objective presentation of the narrative. He takes his readers with assurance over the roads and tracks of the "Big Res," describing its imposing terrain, the sweep of its rain showers, the play of light in the canyons, the smells of the sage, the colors and textures of the stone and dirt, his deep knowledge of this part of the Great Southwest creating a powerful sense of place.

This story is thus fixed firmly in place. If we can't find "Yells Back Butte" on the Automobile Club's "Indian Country" map, we nevertheless are reassured by being able to locate the abandoned "Goldtooth" (ABND) trading post. His narrative style is lean and crisp, well edited, and signposted with markers of time, place, and atmosphere into a satisfying work of narrative art.

With his two main characters, Chee and Leaphorn, Hillerman makes effective use of a narrative technique known in modernist criticism as Free Indirect Discourse, defined in the Bloomsbury Dictionary of English Literature as A technique whereby a narrative reports the speech or thoughts of a character, referring to that character in the third person but adopting the character's own idiom. Free indirect discourse thus falls between direct speech (or thought), which quotes a character's words verbatim, and reported speech (or thought), which paraphrases the speech or thoughts of the character in the idiom of the narrator. When free indirect discourse is used there is often a productive ambiguity as to which judgments are attributable to the character and which to the narrator and/or implied author. (See http://www.xrefer.

com/entry/365205) The result is that we gain insight not only into each detective's reasoning processes but also his emotional state, especially as it relates to the personal

form of the detection theme. We learn about Leaphorn's devotion to his late wife Emma and his wretched state of loneliness and despair subsequent to her unexpected death. And we learn about Chee's ambiguous feelings toward Janet Pete and his deep desire for a companion who will share his love and respect for traditional Navajo ways.

However important these techniques are, arguably one of his most striking qualities is his skillful use of direct discourse. Hillerman has a good ear, and his journalistic training and professional career taught him much about how to create dialogue that sounds right and advances the story with every beat, the directly quoted speech between and among two or three persons in short scenes contributing to the dramatic quality and pace of the narration. Not only do these conversational exchanges develop and present information that advances the plot or elucidates one or more social issues or themes, they also reveal the habitual and characteristic worldview of the characters involved. Even the villain emerges by these means as more than merely the one-dimensional stock figure his appearance and function suggest. Dr. Woody's intelligence and drive are commendable, but his hubris is as deadly as that which attracted the pen of Sophocles and Euripedes so long ago. Deadly stuff, and Hillerman shows it in action in the high country of northeast Arizona at the end of the twentieth century.

Themes

The novel's central theme as well as its genre-specific device is detection, the discovery of answers to deep, puzzling, and important questions. But it is not merely the device with which to develop a formulaic "mystery" novel. Because it stems from a powerful and compelling human characteristic, the desire to learn, to solve a problem, to reach a goal, it constitutes a powerful thematic core of the novel. It is enacted in three modes that interweave effectively to create an effective and compelling structure. They are, first, the scientific search to discover ways to defeat the new supermicrobes that literally threaten all mankind; second, the police search for the murderer of Officer Kinsman and for the missing Catherine Pollard; and third, the search by both Chee and Leaphorn for love and companionship.

The first of these clustered "detection" themes in The First Eagle involves the search by "the dedicated scientist," Dr. Albert Woody, for the details of how certain individuals in a "reservoir" rodent population are able to evolve a natural immunity to Yersinia pestis, the bacterium that causes bubonic plague. In his noble quest to "save all manknd from the little beasties," Woody becomes convinced that his motives justify everything he does. He apparently has little hesitation in murdering two individuals who obstruct his scientific quest as well as sacrificing his assistant and, finally, even himself to his noble quest. Centered in the corrupting power of ambition and money as well as the paradox of noble motives leading to immoral acts, this theme resonates throughout literature and achieves here a vigorous and satisfying embodiment that lifts Hillerman's writing above the merely generic.

The second form of the theme of detection involves the police search for the murderer of Officer Kinsman and for the missing person, Catherine Pollard. At first Acting Lieutenant Jim Chee believes that he has captured the killer literally "red-handed" in the form of Robert Jano, a young Hopi who was attempting to capture an eagle required for a Hopi ceremonial. But here, as in the final formulation of the theme of detection, Chee is looking for a solution in the wrong places. First of all, Jano denies his involvement. Second, because of its personal connection to the third form of the detection theme, this major portion of the plot involves Chee's developing, albeit reluctantly, information that leads him and Leaphorn to the actual murderer—thus bringing this embodiment of the detection into alignment with its other two forms.

The third form of the theme of detection involves the search by both Chee and Leaphorn for love and companionship. Chee feels that he has been betrayed once by Janet Pete, a "mixed blood" Navajo with whom he had a serious relationship, perhaps even been engaged. Pete is an elegant young professional woman, more at home in the urban excitement of Washington D.C.

than the lonely spaces of the reservation.

She is brilliant and ambitious, eager to rise in the Justice Department. Chee, on the other hand, although educated at the University of Arizona, works hard to return to his traditional roots, even to the point of learning to perform such traditional Navajo healing ceremonies as the Blessing Way.

Despite her earlier treatment of him, Chee is excited as well as apprehensive when he learns that Pete is coming back to the area as the defender of Jano. His lingering doubts about the trustworthiness of his feelings for Pete are resolved just as his convictions of Jano's guilt are dissolved. At the end of the novel it becomes apparent that Chee has been "looking for love in all the wrong places," ignoring the admiration of fellow Officer Bernadette Manuelito .

In a similar fashion, the senior and now former member of this duo of Navajo Tribal Police, Joe Leaphorn, is discovering again the delights of a wise and caring female companion in the form of Dr. Louisa Bourbonette, a professor of anthropology at Northern Arizona State University. In this developing relationship, the detection theme works itself out in at least two ways. First, Leaphorn discovers that, while his love for his late wife Emma, taken from him when a brain tumor required a risky operation, is undiminished, sharing his efforts to find Pollard with Louisa is satisfying and gives him hope. After a period of prolonged mourning, Leaphorn is discovering again that it is not good for man to be alone. Each of these four individuals discovers the need for love, companionship, and connection, rendering them well developed characters.

Several other themes emerge from the actions, thoughts, and speech of the characters. The dilemma that Jim Chee faces in his pursuit of Janet Pete, involves the conflicts between values of several sorts. Urban money and position oppose rural space and a life of service; the values of a traditional Navajo life oppose the values of the Anglo world in such matters as the death penalty being sought by Acting Assistant U. S. Attorney J. D. Mickey for Robert Jano, alleged killer of Officer Kinsman. The theme of justice triumphing over race-based enmity emerges in the cooperation of Cowboy Dashee and former Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn.

And the value of traditional Navajo belief and ritual in the lives of Jim Chee and his uncle is an on-going theme in all of Hillerman's "Navajo" novels.

Adaptations

George Guidall reads The First Eagle on a nine-hour Harper Audio (1998) in 6 cassettes. As of this writing, no adaptations of The First Eagle have appeared.

IDEAS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS 4 An interesting aspect of Hillerman's fictions is the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural contexts in which they are set with their particular historical imperatives and consequences. The "Big Res" itself although sparsely populated by the standards of large urban enclaves is nevertheless home to a wide mix of Native American tribal entities including Navajo, Apache, Hopi, Ute, Zuni as well as Anglos and Hispanics of various national origins. Add to this cultural diversity such social elements as the disparity of power and wealth between the communities, and the opportunities for friction and conflict are significant. Therefore, a possible focus for discussions of this novel could be to examine the ways in which Hillerman ignores, acknowledges, utilizes, or highlights particular elements of the cultural and economic contexts in the service of his plot, characterization, and themes.

1. Discuss the cultural and societal components of the mutual "disrespect" of the FBI agents and the Navajo Tribal Police. How does Hillerman reveal those tensions? How do they advance the plot and contribute to his discussion of Eagle with this assertion in mind and social issues? discuss the cultural work that it does.

2. Discuss the cultural and societal com-8. Hillerman makes extensive use of Native ponents of the on-again, off-again rela-American religious beliefs, ceremonials, tionship of Jim Chee with Janet Pete in and practices related to those beliefs.

terms of the novel's tensions and themes. Research these beliefs, especially those 3. What biases do Chee and Leaphorn concerned with "Skinwalkers," the teachreveal? Are they successful in over-ings of "Changing Woman," and coming them? "chindi," the ghosts of a dead person and discuss their functions within 4. Hillerman was a member of the faculty Hillerman's fiction. and served as well in the administration of the University of New Mexico 9. Although Leaphorn and Chee are the for a number of years. How does he use central figures in every chapter, Hillerman his knowledge of the "academic cul-populates his novels with a large cast of ture" in the creation and resolution of characters. Examine such characters as his plots and subplots in his fiction, John McGinnis, Shirley Ahkeah, Bernie especially in The First Eagle? Manuelito, Mrs. Dineyahze, and Old Lady Notah. Discuss their functions in 5. Hillerman has often said that he loves the novel and their characterizations, the "high, dry" world of the Navajo that is, how Hillerman makes each an reservation and its surroundings in the individual memorable in his or her four-state area of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. How does own right.

Hillerman use this unique setting, this 10. Research the development of modern particular combination of geography antibiotics, the effects of their use and and climate,

in this novel? In his other misuse. How realistic is Hillerman's "Navajo" mysteries? Compare his use of a particular geographical setting to use of this issue? Is humankind at genuine risk from strains of various miWilliam Faulkner's use of the Delta region of the South or Willa Cather's of crobes that have developed resistance the north central plains. to existing antibiotics?

Literary Precedents

Hillerman's roots in fiction go back first of all to the front porch story-telling oral tradition of Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, then, of course, to the hard-boiled mystery writers such as Eric Ambler, Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, and Ed McBain. He credits Graham Greene's The Third Man and The Comedians for stirring one's urge to try to write because he is such a master of his craft. He admires George V. Higgins, the "Brueghel of Dialogue" (Talking Mysteries, 27), and he finds occasional recourse to E. B. White or the younger Hemingway helpful when he needs to eliminate adverbs and adjectives. And there's also more than a hint of the English cozy tradition in his work. After all, despite its huge geographic area, the Navajo Reservation where everyone seems related in one way or another resembles a small English village where everyone knows everyone's business—and bloodlines. And it should go without saying that his literary indebtedness suggests a deep knowledge of the traditional police procedural.

Related Titles

In addition to the work of Tony Hillerman, the 1970s saw the modern Native American being featured as a detective in the work of Brian Garfield whose Sam Watchman, a Navajo state trooper in Arizona, is featured in Relentless(l972) and The Threepersons Hunt (1974). Richard Martin Stern's novels featured Apache Detective Johnny Ortiz in: Murder in the Walls (1971), You Don't Need an Enemy (1972), Death in the Snow (1973), Tsunami (1988), Tangled Murders (1989), Missing Man (1990), Interloper (1990).

Hillerman's "Navajo" novels include The Blessing Way (1970), Dance Hall of the Dead (1973), Listening Woman (1978), People of Darkness (1980), The Dark Wind (1982), The Ghostway (1984), Skinwalkers (1986), A Thief of Time (1988), Talking God(1989), Coyote Waits(l990), Sacred Clowns(1993), The Fallen Man(l996), The First Eagle(l998), Hunting Badger (1999), and Golden Calf (2002). Hillerman Country with text by Tony Hillerman and magnificent photographs by his brother, Barney Hillmerman, was published by his regular publisher, HarperCollins, Publishers in 1991.

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