

# Sacred Clowns Short Guide

## Sacred Clowns by Tony Hillerman

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# Characters

The two protagonists of *Sacred Clowns* are once again Hillerman's Navajo policemen, Officer Jim Chee and Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn. In this novel, however, they now work together in the new Special Investigations Office on the Navajo Reservation.

Leaphorn, the older and more analytical of the two, is now Chee's immediate supervisor. Various conflicts arise between them. Leaphorn attempts to force Chee to be more thorough in his reports and less impulsive in his methods. Chee resents Leaphorn's control, especially when the lieutenant assigns him to find a runaway Navajo boy rather than to a more important case.

As the novel progresses, however, the two men come to understand each other. Leaphorn not only recognizes that he himself was impulsive when he was Chee's age, but he also experiences paternal feelings for the younger man.

The novel provides both Chee and Leaphorn with romantic interests.

Chee's relationship with Janet Pete reaches fruition as they work out their cultural differences, and their relationship grows from friendship to love.

Although a city Indian by background, Pete comes to view herself as Navajo and to appreciate Chee's traditionalism. Chee works through his concerns with traditional Navajo incest taboos based on the complexities of Navajo clan relationships and accepts Pete as a possible wife. Leaphorn in the mean time continues dealing with the death of his wife and his new relationship with Professor Louisa Bourebonette, a folklorist at Northern Arizona University. Both men come to accept the women as lovers only by undergoing important changes. Chee must slightly compromise his desire to be a traditional Navajo while at the same time being a cop, and Leaphorn must leave off grieving for his dead wife in order to accept Louisa as his new love.

Three significant white characters represent different attitudes toward Native Americans and their territories.

Asher Davis, an Indian trader, is known for his fairness in business dealings with Native Americans. He has a reputation, undeserved it turns out, as an honest trader who pays Native Americans high prices for artifacts. His best friend from high school, Roger Applebee, is a lawyer and environmentalist, a leader of Nature First, an organization working to prevent the turning of Jacks Wild Mine into a toxic dump. Ed Zeck, another lawyer and one of Janet Pete's former bosses, works for a Washington, D.C., firm. An expert on Pueblo water rights and land claims, he regularly lobbies tribal council meetings to achieve political ends. He has gone into the cattle business with Navajo Councilman Jimmy Chester, and, like Chester, Zeck supports the Jacks Wild Mine project. The three men represent different ways that the white establishment influence events in Indian Country.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Like Hillerman's earlier novels, *Sacred Clowns* explores the various conflicts between Navajo and white culture. Also like some of his earlier novels, the book highlights conflicts among various Indian cultures, exploring how people's cultural backgrounds form their views of the world.

One of the major themes concerns the different ways that whites and Navajos view justice. White culture draws on the Judeo-Christian tradition that views justice as fitting the punishment to the crime. Thus, as Janet Pete, a half Navajo, half Scottish lawyer trained in the American justicial system, argues, when people commit crimes, they must be brought to justice and receive just retribution. Because Pete, having been raised off the reservation, is half Navajo by blood but not by culture, she does not understand the traditional Navajo position on crime that Jim Chee appreciates. This view argues another tradition of justice, that of restoring hozho, or harmony, after a crime. If Navajos harm another person, they must achieve justice not through retribution but through determining the amount of damage done and making appropriate restitution. In the novel, Clement Hoski, a Navajo grandfather, gets drunk and kills a pedestrian in a hit-and-run accident. He is a good man in every other way, the best sign of his goodness being his love for his abandoned grandson, Ernie, who suffers retardation from fetal alcohol syndrome. To provide restitution, Hoski is willing to pay the family of his victim every two weeks, and Chee, because he understands that sending Hoski to jail would harm Ernie and do the victim's family no good, saves Hoski from the retribution of American justice by refusing to arrest him.

A second theme concerns how different Native American cultural backgrounds lead to different understandings of the world. In *Sacred Clowns*, Hillerman explores in detail the cultural biases and blind spots that different tribes have for each others' cultures. When Chee and Pete view a kachina dance at the fictitious Tano Pueblo, neither Chee the more traditional nor Pete the more Americanized Navajo can fully understand the ceremony. Both are as much outsiders to Pueblo culture as are whites. When Chee, Pete, and Harold Blizzard, a Cheyenne, watch John Ford's movie *Cheyenne Autumn* with its Navajo actors playing Cheyennes, Blizzard does not understand the jeering reactions of the Navajo audience to the movie. His confusion is only partly because he does not understand the Navajo lines that the actors deliver; even when Chee translates, Blizzard, and Pete as well, lack the cultural backgrounds to understand the absurdities that the Navajo audience recognizes. Implicit in Hillerman's social commentary is the notion that people from different cultures cannot understand each other unless they strive to build bridges. Chee and Leaphorn represent an ideal in Hillerman's fictional world. While both grew up Navajo and understand their home culture, they also understand the white world in which they were educated and with which they interact as police officers.

An important subtheme in the novel concerns differing views of the land.



Having a deep appreciation of traditional Navajo culture, Chee holds ambivalent views on appropriate land use.

When he ponders the Navajo Agricultural Industries' success in irrigating what had been unspoiled desert to grow crops, he feels both pride and regret. He is proud that his Navajo forbearers had managed to save this property, and the water that irrigates it, from white landgrabbers; but he also looks with dismay at the destruction of its ancient beauty that the great spirit of Changing Woman had witnessed at Earth's beginning. Also, as an environmentalist, Chee writes a letter to the local paper speaking out against using the open pit of Jacks Wild Mine as a toxic waste dump, but Ed Zeck, a white expert on Navajo land use, views such a project as a sign of progress that brings needed jobs to the Reservation.



## Techniques

In terms of form, *Sacred Clowns* continues Hillerman's commitment to the realistic detective genre. The book traces Chee and Leaphorn's attempts to solve two murders that at first seem unconnected, a shop teacher at a Catholic high school and a nonresident member of Tano Pueblo. While the plot follows the convention of the murder mystery, Hillerman gives the novel depth through his use of Southwestern settings, Native American cultures, and history. The key to the murder is Tano's Lincoln Cane, one of a series of ceremonial mahogany and silver canes that Abraham Lincoln gave to each pueblo during the Civil War to encourage the tribes to remain neutral. Hillerman manages to weave into his narrative the historical background of the cane — and its significance to contemporary Pueblo life — while at the same time using the cane as a convincing plot device to link the two victims.

## Key Questions

Hillerman's novels address questions about how people's cultural backgrounds affect the ways they experience reality. To understand other people, Hillerman suggests in his work, one must understand their cultural backgrounds and values, not easy tasks for outsiders. In *Sacred Clowns*, Hillerman makes a special effort to demonstrate the diversity of Native American cultures by showing that people from different tribes do not readily understand each other. The best example of this confusion is the inability of Sergeant Blizzard, an officer of Bureau of Indian Affairs of Cheyenne ancestry, to interrogate Navajos because he does not understand their conventions of politeness. To get information from these reticent people, he has to call on Chee, who understands how to question members of his tribe. The ways that various characters view reality in *Sacred Clowns* (and his other novels) raise important issues for discussion, such as the following:

1. What are the different views of the land expressed in the novel? How do various Native American characters view it? White characters?

2. What are the differences in Chee's and Leaphorn's backgrounds that influence their views of their work? Why is Leaphorn more analytical than Chee?

Why is Chee so impulsive?

3. How does Leaphorn's attitude toward Chee change in the novel?

Chee's attitude toward Leaphorn?

4. How do Chee and Pete change during the novel as they come to recognize that they love each other? What does each have to give up in order for them to become lovers?

5. How convincing is Chee's decision not to bring Clement Hoski to American justice? Does Hoski's agreement to pay restitution to the dead man's family seem fair?

6. Why is the novel titled *Sacred Clowns*? How do the people of Tano Pueblo view the clowns? How does this view differ from the way that white culture views the clown? What roles do the clowns play in the Tano Pueblo kachina ceremony?

## Literary Precedents

The literary precedents for *Sacred Clowns* are American realism, the detective novel, and the American local color tradition. Hillerman continues his realistic portrayal of Chee and Leaphorn as they solve the two murders.

Since the murders take place in different jurisdictions, Hillerman suggests something of the complexity of law enforcement in Indian Country as the two policemen interact with other law enforcement agencies. His tightly-written style owes much to novelists such as Hemingway and the hard-boiled school of mystery writers, including Raymond Chandler. But Hillerman often enhances the detective genre with his emphasis on local color. He attempts to present the native peoples of the region sometimes humorously, always sympathetically, to give his readers a sense of the Native Americans' humanity. His novels render ethnographic detail as accurately as do many scholarly texts.





# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994