

# **Skeleton Man Study Guide**

## **Skeleton Man by Tony Hillerman**

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# Plot Summary

*Skeleton Man* is a tale about the search for a case of diamonds lost in a historic collision between two airliners over the Grand Canyon in 1956. The air crash was real, and in fact triggered the formation of the Federal Aviation Administration, but the diamonds and the characters that encounter them are fiction. Joanna Craig is the illegitimate daughter of John Clarke, the man who carried the diamonds cuffed to his wrist. His arm is also missing, which is the object of Joanna's real quest. DNA from the arm will prove that she is the daughter of John Clarke and allow her to reclaim her father's fortune, which was swindled away from his estate by an attorney named Dan Plymale. Joanna is wealthy in her own right, having inherited her elderly stepfather's fortune when her mother died. She is motivated more by revenge against Plymale than greed for the diamonds.

The Grand Canyon is administered by the National Parks Service and under the jurisdiction of Sergeant Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police. Chee gets involved in the search for the diamonds at the request of Cowboy Dashee. Dashee's nephew, Billy Tuve, was charged with the robbery and murder of a jewelry storeowner when he tried to hock a \$10,000 diamond, which he thought was zirconium, for \$20. Dashee is a Hopi, but Jim Chee is his good Navajo friend. His nephew Billy claims he traded a folding entrenching tool to an old Hopi shaman, who lives at the bottom of the canyon, for a fake diamond. The hunt for the diamonds, and John Clarke's arm, culminates at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, just as a major thunderstorm lets loose. Jim Chee is there with his fiancé Bernie, Joanna Craig and Chandler, a thug hired by Plymale to prevent Joanna from finding her father's arm. Cowboy Dashee enters the canyon with Chee and Bernie, but he is felled by a broken ankle and has to be taken out by a rescue helicopter.

The search climaxes in a narrow side gorge that feeds the big canyon. The entrance to an even narrower slot canyon, the domicile of the old shaman, is in the side gorge. Joanna and Chandler team in an unlikely alliance with Chandler suspecting that he intends to kill her. An old Hopi woman shows Bernie the way into the hidden slot canyon, where she discovers the mummified remains of the shaman and a shrine he has built to Matwa, a Kachina spirit that showed the Hopis they need not fear death. The shrine consists of the diamonds, contained in shiny snuff tins and the skeletal remains of John Clarke's arm.

The slot canyon floods as the storm builds. Joanna and Bernie escape the deluge by climbing on to the ledge the old shaman used for a sleeping place. Chandler, however, cannot tear himself from his task of harvesting the diamonds and is swept away. Sergeant Chee tries to save Chandler as he is washed out of the narrow slot canyon, but he won't let go of his diamonds and perishes. Everyone else survives, and as the flood subsides, they return to the surface. Joanna has clung to the arm bones and can now destroy Plymale and claim her fortune.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Joe Leaphorn, aging and restless after his retirement as a detective for the Navajo Tribal Police, sits in the Navajo Inn with his coffee cronies—law enforcement types and other colorful locals—discussing the recently solved case of the Skeleton Man. Joe is attempting to articulate his deeply held and ancient native beliefs about how things work in the universe. Describing what some might now call *Systems Theory*, Joe tells how all events and things in the universe are ultimately connected; such as more than 150 people dying in an airline collision over the Grand Canyon in 1956, and Billy Tuve appearing 50 years later to hock a rare and valuable diamond for \$20. According to Joe, the cosmos is "like some infinitely complex machine," with all of the parts working together in harmony.

Sam Pinto proves he understands Joes's notion by citing a tale in which the birds stop flying because of a hot wind. One too many birds land on a branch, and it breaks and falls into the river. The branch diverts the flow of the river. The water erodes the bank, causes a landslide, and floods the valley. That changes the flora, which changes the fauna. The deer leave the valley for better food, and the people in the valley leave to find deer they can hunt. Pinto, however, does not believe this sort of reasoning can be applied to the events Joe just described. Joe Leaphorn also suspects that Joanna Craig, who has come to search for missing diamonds, is motivated more by revenge than money.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

In Chapter 1, Hillerman faces the serial author's dilemma of introducing existing characters to new readers. Purists might argue that the responsibility lies with the reader to read (and buy) the earlier episodes if they want to understand the latest one. That approach may encourage better literature, but drawing new readers into the series at any stage may stimulate sales of both past and future episodes.

Hillerman quickly establishes Joe Leaphorn as the voice of his new tale and treats the reader to a taste of the Navaho legend, lore, and customs that enliven most of his works, placing them a notch above the average mystery. In very few pages, he establishes several dynamics that are fundamental to his books. He introduces the non-western notion that events do not occur from simple cause and effect, but rather from a complex and often invisible series of causes and effects. He illustrates the influence of outside forces on the Navajo culture with the 1956 mid-air collision over the Grand Canyon and the visit by Joanna Craig to the Navajo lands. He also underscores the difference between western values and Navajo beliefs with the introduction of a valuable diamond, which a Navajo boy seeks to sell for a pittance.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Joe Leaphorn recalls the August day when the mystery began. He was bored with retirement and had dropped by the Tribal Police Headquarters to jaw with Sam Pinto. They engaged in small talk about the prospect of Sergeant Chee, obviously one of the members of the old crowd, marrying Bernie, another law-enforcement regular. During the course of their chat, Sam Pinto gives Joe two files, expecting help from the old detective. The first file is old and local, but the other one is new and FBI. The new file concerns a robbery and homicide of a jeweler in the nearby town of Zuni. The only suspect is Billy Tuve, a young, somewhat dull Navajo boy who tried to hock a \$10,000 diamond for \$20. The police found Tuve's fingerprints in the store, and an eyewitness claims to have seen the boy. Tuve claims he got the diamond from an old shaman down in the canyon.

The local file Sam gives Joe involves an old case Joe had handled, in which Shorty McGinnis, a grumpy old trading post owner and begrudging friend of Joe's, was burglarized. After the incident, the trader claimed a \$10,000 diamond on his insurance. Sam tells Joe that Shorty has been dead for a long time. This upsets Joe as he reflects that all of his old friends are dying.

Sam tells Joe that the FBI is interested in the origin of Shorty's alleged diamond and wants to analyze it with diamond-comparison software. When the local office of the Tribal Police went up to Short Mountain to investigate, they were told that Shorty had experienced a heart attack, had been taken off to the hospital in Page, and was never heard from again. When Joe inquires why the FBI is so concerned, Sam says the local agent believes there is something political behind it related to the settlement of an estate and reveals that the Bureau has valued the stone at \$15,000.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Joe's consistent reflection on mortality, and his boredom and displeasure with retirement, likely reflect the feelings of the rugged, lively author. In a 1996 PBS interview, Hillerman said that he believed "he is in great shape for the shape he's in." He was then 71 years old and suffering from rheumatic arthritis. He has had a minor heart attack and cancer, currently in remission. He has one "mediocre" eye, a tricky ankle and two unreliable knees "due to being blown up in WWII."



## Chapter 3

### Chapter 3 Summary

Joanna Craig is talking with her attorney and family friend, Hal Simmons, in his office in New York. Hal was also attorney for Joanna's deceased mother. Her mother had been the mistress of a widowed John Clarke, who died in the 1956 air collision while Joanna's mother was pregnant with her. He was to marry her after he arrived in New York. On the flight, Clarke was carrying a case full of special-cut diamonds, acting as courier for his father, a rich diamond broker. The most spectacular stone in the collection was for Joanna's mother's wedding ring. The mother is described as "flighty and disorganized," and is said to have gone a bit senile after Mr. Clarke's death and a period of cruel treatment by his family.

It becomes clear that both Joanna and Hal Simmons seek revenge against Plymale, who manages a charity to which John Clarke left his fortune in the absence of a direct descendant. If Joanna can find her father's arm in the Grand Canyon, which was attached to the diamond case, the DNA will prove her kinship, and allow her to reclaim her father's fortune and savor the revenge of destroying Plymale.

### Chapter 3 Analysis

Hillerman is laying the groundwork here for development of the relative values theme he introduced in Chapter 1 and which surfaces in all of his Tribal Police mysteries. The diamonds represent revenge for her mother's ill treatment to Joanna and greed and wealth to the mysterious Plymale. The diamond was valued at \$15,000 by the FBI, but worth \$20 to Billy Tuve. The shaman who allegedly gave the diamond to Billy apparently placed a value on it that Hillerman has not yet revealed.

Hillerman also introduces two more central characters in this chapter: the Caucasian heroine and an evil villain, who will play out their modern tale of strife and conflict as guests on the more orderly stage of Native American culture and tradition. Joanna Craig represents the forces of that which is good and compassionate, though naïve, of the alien white system of values and behavior. Plymale, in contrast, might be seen as a modern-day buffalo hunter, focused only on self-enrichment with no concern or understanding of that which he destroys or how it affects others.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Brad Chandler joins Dan Plymale on a private beach in the Caribbean at Plymale's summons. Chandler enjoys and envies the luxury in which he is basking, thinking it should be his by birthright. Both men establish themselves as ruthless and cruel, arrogant and self-focused, and superior to others. Plymale reviews Chandler's history—his *resume*, as it were: Chandler is the black sheep of an "old-money" family, disowned and disinherited by his clan. His tendency toward violence and several arrests have led him to this sorry state, in which he may only bask in the luxury emanating from the power and wealth of others.

Chandler is bitter about losing his inheritance. He has ended up working as a bounty hunter and skip tracer, pursuing criminals who have jumped bail. He has killed several of his targets, often with a nod from the local police. He is the suspect in an unsolved homicide in Seattle, and there is a detective there who has become "obsessive" about Chandler. So far, however, he has escaped justice. He was once charged with the crime, but the key witness developed "health problems."

Once Chandler's *bona fides* are established, Plymale gives him his assignments. Plymale describes the 1956 collision and tasks Chandler with finding John Clarke's left arm. He does not know if the diamond case is still attached to the arm, but the diamonds are just the icing on the cake. The real goal is to protect Clarke's fortune, which Plymale manages as the head of the charity to which Clarke bequeathed it.

Plymale tells Chandler that Joanna Craig is a psychic, and that John Clarke's ghost, or at least its voice, has visited her. Her father told her that he is in great pain in the afterworld because he does not have his arm. In the visitation, he asked his daughter to find his arm and reunite it with the rest of his remains to end his pain. She has offered a \$10,000 reward to anyone who can recover the arm. Chandler suggests substituting a different arm, but Plymale X-rays of a healed break to the real arm will uncover a fake. Plymale also informs Chandler that Joanna's mother had sued to recover the fortune and, now that she is dead, her daughter is moving forward with it. However, their only evidence—old love letters to Joanna's mother in John Clarke's writing—is insufficient to prove lineage. Chandler reasons that Plymale would likely face criminal charges as well as lose his fortune if Joanna finds the arm.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Chandler and Plymale are the personification of greed and cruelty, as well as icons of the worst attributes of the white men who imposed their values on the peaceful Navajo and Hopi. Hillerman's sympathies are clearly with the Native Americans, and the characters Plymale and Chandler are intentional stereotypes. This type of





characterization is more typical of literature preceding the French realists, or of some science fiction, in which each character is a one-dimensional personification of a single human characteristic or passion. While this device might be criticized in other works, Hillerman does a good job of using it to support his theme of cultural contrast between western and Native American societies. He is a bit pedantic, generally casting whites in a cynical light, and Native Americans as noble with a full range of human values, foibles and passions. His occasional use of Caucasian stereotypes provides a dark canvas upon which he artfully evokes the soft, caring nature of Navajos and Hopis.

With the foreshadowing in Chapter 4, Hillerman first begins to draw the characters, and the reader, into the depths of the Grand Canyon. He builds these first tugs toward the canyon floor into a robust vortex in the next few chapters. The effect is so powerful that it sucks characters and readers alike not only into the canyon, but into the eye of the vortex surrounding the shaman. He is so adept with this aspect of his craft that the first-time Hillerman reader might feel a sense of vertigo, as if standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Joe Leaphorn listens to a telephone message from Louisa Berbonette, an anthropologist with whom he has had a long-term romantic relationship. Louisa studies the Navajo, Hopi, Ute, Piute, and Zuni cultures. So far, she has declined Joe's periodic entreaties to wed. Joe is a widower. She says that she is going to the canyon floor to capture the oral traditions the older Havasupai living there.

Joe also gets a call from Cowboy Dashee, another member of the Tribal Police, announcing the marriage between Jim Chee and Bernie. Cowboy also asks Joe to help him on another matter. Tuve, the boy held in the robbery-homicide, is Cowboy's cousin, and he wants Joe to help him prove his innocence. Bored with retirement, Joe agrees to help. He leaves a message that he'll meet Cowboy at the Navajo Cultural Center or, if he misses him there, at Short Mountain later.

Joe does miss Cowboy at the center and continues to Short Mountain where Shorty McGinnis used to run the trading post. The old store is desolate, with a "for sale" sign tacked on the front. Leaphorn knocks, but there is no response. He steps inside for a moment and hears a television in the back room. He finds Shorty McGinnis there, very much alive. McGinnis makes coffee for Joe and pours himself a tumbler of Jack Daniels. Shorty says there is no more business at the trading post, and the gasoline companies won't haul gas there any more because they burn more delivering it than he sells.

Joe asks Shorty about the old robbery and the diamond he claimed on his insurance. They reminisce about old times, but McGinnis doesn't say if the insurance company ever paid for the diamond. Joe tells him about the robbery-homicide involving Tuve and Cowboy. Joe says that the FBI claims Tuve stole it, but the boy claims he got it years ago from an old man in the canyon. McGinnis goes into the other room and returns with a leather pouch. Inside the pouch is an ornate snuff can, which contains Shorty's diamond. McGinnis says, "I'll tell you a story. It may help, but probably not."

He tells the tale of a man named Reno who rode by the trading post one winter on a horse, saying he had been living in the canyon with some hippies, but had become separated and lost. An old man had shown him the way out of the canyon, and had traded the pouch and diamond for Reno's hunting knife. Reno assumed the stone was zirconium, and Shorty agreed with him. Reno, however, needed to get to town, and traded his horse, the pouch, and the zirconium for food and a ride. On the way to town, Reno told McGinnis that the old man had many similar tins, each with a diamond. The man had made "airplane and big fire gestures" when Reno had asked him in sign language from where the stones had come.



## Chapter 5 Analysis

Hillerman is still struggling with the problem of introducing new readers to old characters, but does it deftly through telephone messages to Joe Leaphorn and Joe's reminiscences. This segues nicely into the resurrection of Shorty McGinnis, who advances the plot with the story of Reno the cowboy. The attraction of the canyon floor increases with the news that Joe's girlfriend, Louisa the anthropologist, is headed there. Reno's story about the old man who gave him the diamond, which seems to corroborate Tuve's story, continues to draw the characters there as well, and, where the good guys go, the bad guys will follow.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Chapter 6 begins with a description and brief history of Bernadette Manuelito, or Bernie. Everyone loves Bernie. She was a star softball player in high school, assisted in the biology lab at the university, graduated from the Tribal Police Academy, worked for Jim Chee whom she expects to marry soon, and did a short stint with the U.S. Border Patrol.

Bernie seems to have everything going for her, but today she is glum. Her mother argues that she should not marry Jim Chee, and it is beginning to wear her down. She agrees to talk with Hosteen Peshakai, her Clan Father. She also feels Chee is not paying enough attention to her. His voice messages are too official. He called to tell her that he would be going into the canyon on business, but didn't invite her to go along. She supposes that he forgot about the time she told him how exciting it was to visit the canyon as a schoolgirl with her class and her naturalist teacher. She grows more disgruntled by the thought that doesn't listen to her.

Bernie drives to Jim Chee's trailer and notes the beauty of the cumulus clouds growing on the horizon along the way. She bemoans the absence of the summer monsoons, which may come too late this year to do much good for the grazing land of her people. She supposes the clouds will probably go elsewhere to drop their rain as they have been doing all summer, but also recalls the weatherman saying the high-pressure bubble that has been keeping the area dry is beginning to disintegrate.

When Bernie arrives at Sergeant Chee's trailer, his car is gone. She begins to soften as she remembers his kind ways. She smiles as she recalls the story of a pregnant cat, abandoned by city people to fend for itself in the desert. The cat decided to take up residence near Jim Chee's trailer, but it was not wise to the ways of the wild. Jim knew the cat would be easy prey for the coyotes and shook his head at the ways of the city people who abandoned it. He felt sorry for the cat, but he could not adopt it as a pet and deprive it of a chance "to be a free and able cat, not a slave of his human species." He decided to protect her until she could learn some survival skills, but with a formal relationship that fit the natural relationship between human and feline. He expressed his non-affection for his new non-pet by naming it Cat.

Jim cut a hole in the bottom of his trailer door and attached a hinged flap to it. He coaxed Cat in with some sardines to help her learn to use the flap as an escape hatch from coyotes, but that was the limit of his affection. When Cat was inside, the two remained mutually aloof. One night, a crazy lady, who claimed Jim was a Skinwalker and had cursed her, came to his trailer to kill him. Cat heard her outside and bolted for the flap with such a racket that it woke Jim up. He rolled out of bed just as the crazy lady blew a hole through the trailer wall where Jim's head had rested. Cat ended up saving his life, further evidence of the connectedness of all things. As Bernie reflects on

the story of Cat and Jim's willingness to break the white man's rules in favor of Native American kindness, her doubts about her marriage dissipate.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Hillerman graciously introduces the existing characters of Bernie and Jim Chee to new readers. He also weaves a striking tapestry of the landscape as Bernie contemplates the clouds. He introduces another element of foreshadowing with the drought and the news that the high-pressure front is dissolving. Anyone familiar with the topography surrounding the Grand Canyon is surely aware of the danger of flash flooding during a heavy downpour. This factor adds force to the vortex that is now relentlessly pulling the characters and readers to the canyon floor, as surely as gravity will assure that the waters will join them there.

Not only does the story of Cat fill in the character of Jim Chee for the new reader, it provides a sensitive and artistic portrayal of the Native American view of the harmony of nature and the mutual respect of all species toward one another. It contrasts this with the insensitivity of the city dwellers that left a pregnant domestic cat in the wild.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Joanna Craig arrives in New Mexico, where she bails Billy Tuve out of the Gallup jail and takes him to a hotel room to question him about the diamond. An attorney, she declares herself his attorney of record and creates the client-attorney privilege. Billy Tuve does not trust her immediately. He is silent and non-responsive. He says that the other white people he has known were always after something. Joanna explains about her father, her mother, the air collision, and her search for her father's severed arm. She notes that if they can find the old man in the canyon, they will be able to prove that Tuve is innocent. He smiles and agrees, but points out that they would also find the diamonds, which would make her rich. She says that she seeks only her father's arm to end his pain in the afterlife.

When Joanna tells Tuve about the visitations from her father, he begins to pay close attention. These kinds of stories are far more credible to him than tales of the temporal world peopled by whites. Joanna realizes that her new friend is mentally challenged, and learns a horse rolled on him as a child and damaged his brain. She wants to open up to him and to believe him. She orders lunch, and he tells her about his bad dreams of being pinned under the horse and unable to get out.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Joanna emerges as a white character that seems attuned to Native American ways. She forms a close affinity with Tuve, though he is very young and disabled. This relationship subtly underscores the theme established in Chapter 6 in which all creatures, regardless of species or condition, respect, honor and understand all others.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Lightening and thunder startle Cowboy Dashee and Jim Chee as they climb out of Jim's car in the jail parking lot. They indulge in friendly banter with Mrs. Sosi, the woman at the desk, and Cowboy Dashee claims that it must rain because the Zuni are having their rodeo today. It is a standing joke that the Zuni always have the rain dance ceremony before the rodeo, and the rodeo always gets rained out. Mrs. Sosi says she once asked the Zuni why they didn't wait until after the rodeo to do the rain dance, and they had told her that having it before rodeo kept the cowboys from getting hurt.

When Cowboy and Jim ask to see Tuve, Mrs. Sosi informs them that a lady attorney named Joanna Craig showed up with a \$50,000 cashier's check and bailed him out. She says that she heard Ms. Craig say she was going to the El Rancho Motel. She also tells them that a man also came to talk to Tuve about, getting the money together to post his bail, but he just missed Tuve and Joanna. In route to the El Rancho Motel, Cowboy and Jim are caught in a brief thundershower laced with hail.

At the motel, the duo finds Joanna's room and decides to surprise her. She comes to the door believing that they are room service. After a bit of sparring in which Joanna reveals that she is representing Tuve, Jim Chee says they are not there on police business. They quickly establish that they all want to prove Tuve's innocence. Joanna does not reveal that she is John Clarke's daughter, and claims to represent Tuve at the behest of a not-for-profit charity, the name of which she will not reveal.

Jim and Cowboy interrogate Tuve about the diamond in Joanna's presence. He repeats that he got it from an old man in the canyon that did not look like a Hopi. He speculates that he may have been a Havasupai, who also live at the bottom of the canyon. However, he was near the sacred Hopi Salt Woman Shrine, outside of Havasupai territory. They ask Tuve to tell them what he was doing down in the canyon in the first place, but he says some of it is Hopi "Kiva" business that must remain secret from Jim, a Navajo. He can tell Cowboy some of the Kiva business in the Hopi tongue, but not all, because they were not initiated into the same Kiva. Joanna frowns at these complex jurisdictional nuances.

Tuve tells of wandering down the canyon bank on a religious quest, his initiation, stopping frequently for prayers and to plant painted feathers and prayer sticks where the spirits traditionally dwelled. As Cowboy and Tuve talk of secret things in their common tongue, Chee lets his attention wander. He wonders for a moment why Joanna's handbag seemed so heavy when he'd handed it to her earlier. He wonders if it contains a pistol or a tape recorder. The stormy weather continues to build outside. He thinks about Bernie, and then about one of his many old girlfriends who had taught him an old Zuni prayer: *Send out your cloud towers to live with us, stretch out your watery hands of mist. Let us embrace one another.* Tuve completes his story at the point where he met



the old man. He says the old man approached him while he was digging roots with an Army surplus entrenching tool and offered to trade him the diamond, which Tuve assumed was fake. The group discusses native traditions and rituals to educate Joanna and ends the session. As the men leave, the thunder is receding to the east, away from Gallup.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Chandler asserts himself as a shadowy character in the background with his abortive attempt to visit Tuve in jail. There is heavy foreshadowing of the weather in this chapter, and a persistent lure to the canyon floor with Tuve's account of his earlier journey there. The detail about native rituals and traditions serves not only to educate Joanna and the reader, but also enhances a supernatural aura established earlier with the tale of John Clarke's ghost and Joanna and Tuve's discussion of nightmares. It does not take great imagination to envision tension and crises in the canyon, as the entire cast engages in further intrigue. The team that will undoubtedly battle the forces of evil at the bottom of the canyon begins to form. Joanna and the tribal policemen share a strong mutual desire to prove Tuve's innocence despite their suspicions of each other.





# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

One of Billy Tuve's uncles arrives to take him home to Shungopovi on the Second Mesa. Chee gives Joanna his card, asks her to stay in touch, and gathers up Cowboy to get something to eat. At lunch, a good deal of good-natured cross-cultural teasing, Hopi versus Navajo, intertwines with police talk. They wonder to each other why Joanna's purse is so heavy. They agree that there is little chance of finding the old man in the canyon, but hope that Joanna might have better luck with a good guide. There is some talk about where Chee and Bernie will live after they're married. Cowboy teases Chee about living in the trailer. Chee says, and believes, he fully intends to live there, but says he's will look at other options with Bernie before he convinces her of that.

After lunch, Chee returns to his trailer, on a beautiful site above the San Juan River, and retrieves a telephone message from Joe Leaphorn. The message says that Leaphorn may have evidence from Shorty McGinnis that will corroborate Tuve's story. He wants to get more involved. Chee had a long history with Joe before he retired and enjoyed working with him, but he reasons that he should spend time with Bernie and put aside childish adventures like hunting a shaman in the canyon bottom.

Chee retires to a well-worn fallen oak limb, his special thinking spot, to contemplate his past and future. During this introspection, he recalls a failed affair in which his lover wanted to remove him from his natural environment and train him to be white. However, he still clings to boyhood dreams about becoming a shaman, a holy man, for his people. He recalls the pregnant and vulnerable Cat and his attempt to restore her stolen freedom. He realized the futility of this endeavor, however, when he realized Cat had been de-clawed, "a cruel and barbarous custom" that spoiled the animal for a life as a natural, feral cat. During Cat's period with him, Chee had dated Mary Landon, a schoolteacher at Crowpoint Elementary, who was originally from Wisconsin. She agreed to marry him, and then planned his future. He was to accept a standing offer of employment from the FBI and seek an assignment in Wisconsin. She did not take his dreams and commitment to his own people seriously. She returned to Wisconsin, and their relationship cooled. He sent Cat to her, and she renamed her Alice. He had a Christmas card from her with a picture of her with her new husband and Alice comfortably poised on a couch in Wisconsin.

Chee returns to his trailer and the phone rings. He expects to hear Bernie, but it is Joe Leaphorn calling to tell him about his encounter with Shorty McGinnis. They discuss the pouch, and Joe says it has a symbol on it that looks like an Anasazi pictogram. (The Anasazi are a lost tribe that disappeared from the Southwest, but left artifacts and pictographs behind. They are a classic archeological mystery.) Joe also tells Chee that he has learned that the widow of the slain jewelry storeowner is ready to testify that her husband had a special diamond in the store. She had forgotten about it until one of their employees had reminded her. The story sounds suspicious to the policemen, but they



think a jury will find it more credible than Tuve's story. Chee tries to call Bernie, but there is no answer. He calls Cowboy Dashee with the new information, and Cowboy makes plans to go into the canyon. Chee says he has to check with Bernie before he can commit to go with him, because he has promised to look at apartments with her.

As soon as he hangs up, Bernie calls. Although he is willing to forgo the adventure in the canyon to go look at apartments, Bernie would much rather go on the adventure. He tries to dissuade her, but she responds that she is no longer working for him and expresses her independence with the comment "what makes you think you're any better at climbing down canyon walls than I am?" Chee relents, perhaps because his philosophy requires him to respect the freedom and independence of all creatures. He realizes he just lost an argument with Bernie and reflects that it is probably the first of many.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The plot moves along as forces coalesce for the inevitable trip into the canyon and the evidence, probably fraudulent, mounts against Tuve. The more important literary component, however, is the allegory of Cat, reflecting the same civilizing forces that have attempted to enslave Chee in the white man's world. He is clearly an exemplary man, intelligent and appealing to women and organizations of both white and Native American cultures. Just as whites tamed and de-clawed Cat, making her unfit for her assigned place in nature, the lady from Wisconsin sought to tame and de-claw Chee, making him unfit for his natural role as a public servant of, and holy man for, his people. Hillerman gives the weather a rest here, but it continues to loom in the distance as a key element in the story.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Brad Chandler picks up Fred Sherman, an ex-cop Chandler has hired, at the Flagstaff airport. As they circle the airport in Chandler's Land Rover, they discuss business. Chandler wants Sherman to find out everything he can about the robbery-homicide involving Billy Tuve. Sherman wants to know what the split is, but Chandler tells him there is no split. Chandler will receive his regular hourly rate, plus expenses, with a \$20,000 bonus if he is successful. Apparently, Sherman has already been on the case. He tells Chandler that Tuve's bail was \$50,000. He also says he saw two Indian cops come to the El Rancho Motel, Tuve's uncle arrive and everybody leave. He is also aware of Shorty McGinnis' diamond and the claim by the storeowner's widow that he had a big diamond in inventory.

Chandler assigns Sherman to find Tuve and the woman who posted his bail. He wants to know about her. Presumably he does not yet know this is Clarke' psychic daughter mentioned by Plymale. Chandler tells Sherman about the air crash and Joanna's quest. Sherman understands that his job is to prevent the other side from finding the arm, which he sees as an easier task than actually finding the arm. As the two men part, Chandler reveals his plan. They will first prevent the other side from finding the arm with the tell-tale pin in the wrist from a childhood accident, and then snag the diamonds for themselves. Chandler tells Sherman where to find Tuve on the Second Mesa, and instructs him to bring him to Chandler. They will all go down and find the stones. Sherman inquires what methods he might use to achieve their goals. A discussion of the Arizona death penalty follows with cynical comments about the difficulty of proving somebody was pushed, rather than fell, into the Grand Canyon.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

This encounter adds little new information, but it does introduce a new bad guy. The reader already knows the information shared between Chandler and Sherman, and it is curious that Hillerman feels it is necessary to explain it over and over. Perhaps he is underscoring the notion that white men all view the diamonds with avarice, which contrasts starkly with Native American values that measure the diamonds' worth in terms of entrenching tools and hunting knives. Still, that point has already been made rather strongly.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Chee, Cowboy Dashee and Bernie make plans to pick up Billy Tuve the next morning and head down the canyon to find the old man with the diamonds. Cowboy is to go to the Second Mesa to pick up Billy, and then meet Chee and Bernie at Tuba City. The next morning, things quickly deteriorate. When Dashee arrives to pick up Billy, he finds that he left with a strange man earlier that morning. On his way down from Second Mesa, Dashee flags down the sheriff, who crosses his path. The sheriff tells Cowboy that Billy's bail has been rescinded, because of the testimony of the storeowner's widow and her employee, and that he is on the way to pick Billy up.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 is straight story without symbolism or literary nuance. It is a pivotal chapter, however, in that it draws the opposing sides closer to direct conflict. When the bad guys take Billy Tuve, it heightens the suspense in preparation for the inevitable descent of the entire cast to the canyon floor.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Joe Leaphorn is sitting in his house listening to the coffee perk and trying to rationalize more eggs for breakfast than would be good for him. He slept in late after a long conversation with Louisa, who had called him on her cell from the canyon floor. She has been recording the oral histories of members of the Havasupai Tribe there for several days. Joe told Louisa that they couldn't determine when Billy got the diamond in the canyon because he hasn't been good with chronology since his accident. Louisa quips that she thought rodeo riders had to have brain damage *before* they got in the saddle. She suggests that Joe find out when Billy was initiated from the Bear Clan, because he had been on his quest at the time. Joe chides himself for missing such an obvious source of information, but rationalizes that he is retired and it really isn't any of his business.

Louisa said she has heard many new myths mixed with the old ones, about bodies and things falling out of the sky from the plane collision. She notes that such modern "contamination" of ancient myths is the bane of anthropologists everywhere. One of the legends mentions an arm with a case hooked to it, caught in driftwood in the river. Louisa also tells him that someone has been distributing flyers offering a \$10,000 reward to anyone who can find the arm with the case. The flyer says the relatives of the dead man want to recover the arm to put it with the rest of the man's remains in the family crypt. She tells Joe, who wants a copy of the flyer, that the same information is contained in advertisements in newspapers from nearby towns.

The last thing that Louisa says is that someone is starting a cult around the Kachina Masaw, also known as Skeleton Man, the spirit who taught the Hopi not to fear death. Joe speculates that the cult may be a cultural device to help people deal with the death and horror of the collision.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

A large part of the mystery is on the brink being solved now that Joe can determine when Billy Tuve went into the canyon. That could make his story more credible by putting it into the proper context. It may be that Hillerman is using his character to express his own frustration with the limitations that age and ill health force on him while he longs to be more active.

Billy's inability to conceptualize chronology is attributed to his brain damage, but it may also be Hillerman's way of highlighting the Native American norm of interpreting time in terms of seasons and the events of nature and man, rather than by the clock. Hillerman also uses this chapter to educate the reader on the methodology of preserving myths and legends used by anthropologists to capture the history of ancient cultures. Louisa's



condemnation of the modern pollution of ancient myths, however, begs several questions. Isn't the incorporation of modern events into Native American oral histories simply a dynamic of the same process they have used over the centuries to record major events and changes to their environment? Is it necessarily contamination to record the effects of modern white people on their culture, any more than it would be contamination to build myths around an invasion by or assimilation of another aboriginal culture? Isn't it just the continuation of a time-honored tradition that has served cultures without written languages faithfully for centuries? Do the actions of white men, simply because they are white, damage the process, rather than simply add to the content of mythical record?



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Chapter 13 flashes back a few hours to the time that Billy Tuve leaves with his uncle to return to Second Mesa. Joanna follows the pair from the El Rancho Motel to Billy's place and parks in a Juniper copse to observe from afar with her binoculars. While she is waiting, she reflects on her life and her mission. She realizes that, although she didn't know anything about John Clarke until her mother died, she feels that it has been her destiny to seek revenge for the way her mother was treated. She grew up in Montana with the belief that her real father had been killed in Vietnam, and she always wondered why her mother had remarried a rich old man with a limousine and a chauffeur. Before her thoughts take her deeper, however, Billy's uncle drives off, and his mother comes out of the house to drive their sheep to their grazing lands. She is preparing to go talk to Billy when another car drives up, driven by Sherman. She had seen him at the Park Service Office, asking about burial sites for the airplane victims and is sure that Plymale has sent him. When Billy gets into Sherman's car and leaves, Joanna follows. Settling behind them at a safe distance, she retrieves a pistol from her purse and drifts back into her own memories.

After her mother died, Simmons, her mother's attorney, gave her an *in the event of my death* letter her mother had written containing the whole story. Her mother wrote that John Clarke's father had known about their affair and the pregnancy, but had told her that she was "gold-digging white trash," unworthy of his family's name. He died of a stroke shortly after his son died in the crash. Shortly after, Plymale, John Clark Sr.'s attorney and confidant, contacted Joanna's mother with an offer to sign away any right to the old man's fortune for \$10,000. As the pregnancy neared term, Plymale upped the ante to \$30,000 if she would abort the baby and provide proof that she had done so.

After her mother's death, Joanna partnered with Simmons to go after Plymale. They hired an investigator, who discovered that rafters in the Grand Canyon had discovered a pile of driftwood with a case cuffed to a human arm tangled in it. It was too dangerous to approach the driftwood in the raft, but they took pictures of the arm. Those pictures were in the letter that Joanna's mother gave her, and Joanna still had her copies. They were the only pictures she'd ever had of her dad. The Park Service had also said that several people had reported meeting a ragged old man who lived on the south side of the river and claimed to have found an arm with a case attached. The people speculated that the old man was the Havasupai shaman with a gift for finding things that had disappeared some 20 years before. Some of these sightings were only a year or two old, and it seems possible that he might still be alive.

Joanna follows the car to the canyon rim, where they park. She views a struggle in the car through her binoculars. She grabs her pistol and stealthily approaches the car. While Sherman is threatening Billy with his own gun, Joanna sneaks up to his open window and sticks her gun in his neck. Sherman tries to bluff and intimidate, but Joanna



doesn't buy it. She disarms Sherman, taking his gun with her handkerchief to keep her fingerprints off of it. Joanna interrogates Sherman at gunpoint, confirming her suspicions of his purpose and his employer. Billy says Sherman was going to kill him, throw his body over the rim and let the coyotes eat him. When Joanna finishes interrogating Sherman, she shoots him in cold blood with his own gun.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Apparently, Joanna is not the innocent victim of greed we have been led to believe. She shoots Sherman without hesitation, and in a professional manner. Joanna seems to be the best of a bad lot of palefaces, but even she can be a ruthless killer if someone gets in her way.

A lot happens in Chapter 13 in addition to this blockbuster piece of character development. Joanna reveals herself as a competent investigator with a keen knowledge of firearms. She gives us a peek at the hatred and resentment she holds for all things having to do with Plymale, something that did not seem so clear until this chapter. The revelation that pictures of the arm exist is a curious development. It begs the question why these are the only pictures Joanna has seen of her dad. Cameras were common in 1956, and it is unlikely that someone of John Clarke's standing would not have given a snapshot to his sweetheart. Is this just a little sloppy on the part of the author, or is there more to it?

There are a couple of other things that appear to be anachronistic oversights. First, the Vietnam War didn't pick up until the early to mid 1960s. Joanna was at least five years old before her mythical father would have gone there. Where was he during her first five years? Then there's the attempt by Plymale to extort her mother into aborting her baby in 1956. Roe v. Wade didn't happen until 1973. Until then, voluntary abortion was a crime. Is it likely that an attorney would have risked disbarment and jail by bribing someone to commit a crime and demand proof? It is possible that these oversights will somehow work their way into the plot, but on the surface, they appear to be errors in either authorship or editing. There was also evidence of sloppiness in an earlier chapter, when the author got confused about who had traded what to whom for diamonds. Billy was the one with the entrenching tool, but in one recollection, Hillerman had Reno (the hunting knife) trading it to the old man.

In spite of these oversights, there is one beautiful, subtle, allusion in this chapter. As Joanna reminisces about the Clarke family's treatment of her mother, one might easily be reminded of Cat. Both were turned out into the world, ill equipped to survive, by cold and insensitive white people.





# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Brad Chandler is at the canyon rim, reviewing his preparations. His Park Service paperwork is in order. He has confirmed that charter flights are available from the Grand Canyon airport, reserved a jeep for a guided tour and collected information about the rules of canyon travel, including warnings of thunderstorms and flash floods during the monsoon season. He charmed a park worker into revealing that Joanna Craig had already descended into the canyon. He grows impatient because he has not heard from Sherman and dials his cell number.

After many rings, a cop named Moya answers and explains that Sherman has been shot and is in critical condition. The last he'd heard from his colleague, Sherman had been at the canyon rim preparing to head down with Billy Tuve. After Chandler tells Moya that he is in Phoenix at a hotel, he tries to get information from the cop. While on the phone with Chandler, Moya sends Phoenix police officers to the hotel and discovers that he isn't registered there. Chandler tells Moya that he just drove into the parking lot and pretends the cell signal is breaking up until Moya disconnects. Before he begins his trek into the canyon, Chandler retrieves a specially built .25 caliber pistol from a cleverly configured shaving cream can, which allows him to smuggle the pistol through airport security checks.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

The plot moves along in a predictable fashion here, with the canyon vortex pulling more of the characters into the canyon. The characters are leaving from various points along the north rim at different times, but they are all being lured to spot where the shaman has the diamonds.

There is a good deal of foreshadowing here. The reader is quickly reminded of the clues about thunderstorms and flash floods discussed in earlier chapters. Chandler reviews his preparations rather flippantly in an attitude that is clearly inadequate for the adventure he faces. His specially made handgun is an icon of the white man's solution to problems, which will likely prove useless against the Native American mysticism.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Joe Leaphorn calls Sergeant Chee to ask if he's still interested in Billy Tuve. He shares the information from Louisa, and Chee tells him about Billy's disappearance. Everyone is unaware that it was Sherman who took Billy, and that he may now be with Joanna Craig. They discuss the wisdom of Bernie accompanying Chee on the trip, but Bernie holds fast to her commitment and claims Chee and Cowboy need someone to take care of them. Chee, Cowboy and Bernie take six hours to reach the canyon floor. When they get there, Chee and Cowboy scout the river for signs of the place where Billy Tuve had met the old shaman, or perhaps for Billy himself. Bernie is assigned to stay at the foot of the sacred Hopi Salt Trail that leads to the Salt Woman Shrine in case Billy shows up.

After a while, Bernie becomes so intrigued by the natural beauty around her that she leaves Billy a note and climbs back up the canyon wall to explore bird nests, toads, frogs and a rare pink Grand Canyon rattlesnake. She marvels at the play of the lights on the multi-colored strata of the canyon and recalls old geology classes and professors to name and date the rocks. While roaming, she finds a set of footprints, which she assumes to be Chee's. She follows them, testing the tracking skills she developed while working for the Border Patrol. As she looks around with her bird-watching binoculars, a man enters her field of vision. The large, blond man has been cooling his feet in the river. He puts on his shoes and begins scanning the canyon with his own binoculars.

Bernie becomes suspicious of the man, thinking he might be FBI or someone seeking John Clarke's arm for the \$10,000 reward. She backs away and carefully descends the sacred Hopi trail. When she arrives at the bottom, an old Hopi woman, who is standing there watching and waiting, greets her.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

Hillerman uses the conversation between Leaphorn and Chee in the first part of Chapter 15 to reiterate many of the clues and other information already given to the reader. He also enhances the relationship between Chee and Bernie. She reestablishes herself as independent and, while Chee tries to respect this, both he and Leaphorn are protective in their traditional masculine roles.

Hillerman uses Bernie's role to take the reader on a small tour of the Grand Canyon floor. Through Bernie's eyes, he paints lovely pictures of the refraction of the light on the many-colored strata of the canyon walls, natural pillars of rock that look manmade, the toads and frogs living in the moisture at the bottom, and the graceful acrobatics of raptors riding the dynamic winds of the canyon. He even gives the reader a glimpse of a rare pink Grand Canyon rattlesnake. When Bernie meets the old Hopi woman, the tale takes one more step into the mystical world of the Hopi belief system.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

"Girl, you shouldn't be here. Here it is dangerous for you," is the first thing the old lady says to Bernie. Bernie introduces her self and asks why it is dangerous for her. The woman says that people who don't "talk the Hopi talk" call her Mary. It is dangerous because Bernie appears to be Navajo, and the Salt Woman Shrine and the Salt Trail are sacred Hopi places. When Bernie explains that she was both invited and escorted by a Hopi, the old woman reflects for a moment, and then becomes friendly. She offers first aid for a cut on Bernie's hand and hares her water with her.

Bernie asks Mary about the danger of which she warned her. They discuss the Hopi legend of Matwa, or Skeleton Man, the Kachina spirit who taught the Hopi not to fear death. Mary tells of an old shaman living in a hidden side canyon who claims to be Matwa. He claims he caused the bodies to fall out of the sky when the airliners collided. The shaman preaches the preference of death over life in an ugly world. He does tricks, producing brilliant diamonds from ugly leather pouches, saying the diamonds represent the brilliance of the place to which the Hopi will go if they choose death over life. Mary tries to dissuade Bernie from exploring the hidden side canyon, but she becomes helpful when Bernie explains that she is trying to save a Hopi boy from wrongful imprisonment.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

Mary confirms that the old shaman exists. While the plot moves a step further, the real message here is about perception and the effect of western-caused events on aboriginal cultures. It would appear that the old shaman, and perhaps some who follow him, has attempted to define the events of 1956 within the patterns of the Hopi culture. It seems reasonable to him that bodies falling out of the sky are the work of the spirit of the Skeleton Man Kachina. For an isolated culture in 1956 might have been unaware of the concept of mass civilian air travel.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Joanna Craig is hot, frustrated, deflated and feeling sorry for her self. She is sitting on a ledge part-way down a trail into the canyon, running short on water and abandoned by Billy Tuve. She had been walking down the trail in front of him and talking to him when he suddenly disappeared. He had made sure that she was past the most dangerous part of the trail and left his water bottle to add to her own supply. Storm clouds are building in an ominous way, increasing her anxiety and misery. Before Tuve left Joanna, he had spotted a man down on the canyon floor. Joanna is now watching him through her binoculars. She suspects the man is the Chandler that Sherman had named as Plymale's agent before she shot him. Joanna reflects on her situation, and then resolves to descend the rest of the way by herself. Her dedication to her quest to prove her lineage builds as she descends the trail.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Chapter 17 brings Joanna back into the story line after a brief absence and disposes of Tuve in a stealthy, Native American way. Although the two central foci of the novel seem to be Tuve and the old shaman, both appear to be incidental to the plot. Their actions do not contribute greatly to unfolding events, yet they are the reasons the events occur. It is doubtful they will assume active roles this late in the story. This chapter forcefully recalls the foreshadowing of the weather when Joanna notes the building thunderheads. With all of the previous references to violent thunderstorms and flash floods, it is reasonable to expect such an event to impact the main players in the mysterious side canyon.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Bradford Chandler is delivered to the canyon's bottom by a charter helicopter in violation of FAA no-fly restrictions. He surmises that Plymale won't complain about the expense for the helicopter, pilot and potential fine if it brings him closer to his objective. He has given up on finding Tuve, and goes to Plan B. From Billy's information, he identifies the place where he thinks the boy traded his entrenching tool for the diamond and positions himself where he can observe the only three approaches to it. As he scans the scene with his binoculars, he spots someone above him observing him with their own binoculars. He also spots Joanna and Tuve descending the Salt Trail. He considers how he will kill Joanna and, given the Arizona death penalty, decides to knock her out with a rock and throw her into the river.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Chandler re-establishes himself as a ruthless character with no mercy or redeeming qualities. The author has set him up to die as a sacrifice to the avarice of western man.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Jim Chee stares downhill at Cowboy Dashee, who is sitting on the trail and trying to remove one of his boots. He then does something with his pant leg. Chee descends to Cowboy to discover that he has slipped and broken his ankle. After trading barbs and deliberating a bit, Chee helps Dashee down to the clear pool by the Salt Woman Shrine. Chee administers first aid and calls the Park Service to order a rescue helicopter. Chee tells Dashee about two sets of tracks he had been following. One was from brand new size 12 men's hiking boots, while the other set was petite and could be Bernie's. He notes that the tracks appear on the same trail, but they were not made at the same time.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

It is not clear why Hillerman brought Cowboy Dashee to the canyon floor first. This contributes nothing to the story line, other than to provide a convenient sounding board for Jim Chee. Now, with a broken leg acquired in an uneventful fall, he is removed entirely. Hillerman may have needed to keep him in the story because he is a regular character in previous novels, and his presence plays to the loyalty of committed fans. In addition, by removing the Dashee from the story, Hillerman sets the stage for more intimate adventures for Chee and Bernie.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

Chandler positions himself to observe the last 100 yards of the trail that Joanna must pass on her hike to the canyon floor. He surmises that she must be the one who shot Sherman and likely has a gun. Shortly, Joanna passes his hiding place, and he calmly confronts her.

Chandler acknowledges that he is after the diamonds, that he was waiting for Billy Tuve, and that he had seen him with her further up the trail. He asks if Billy will come down soon. Chandler admits that he works for Plymale, but proposes to betray Plymale in exchange for half the diamonds if they work together to find the old shaman. Joanna agrees to his terms if she can keep the arm to prove that John Clarke was her natural father. During their discussion, Chandler manages to take Joanna's gun from her backpack.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

Chandler reestablishes himself as a man without morals or loyalty. Hillerman uses the scene to underscore his theme of the superiority of Native American culture. Here are two rich and sophisticated white people, one dispensing of any loyalty to his employer, and the other, who has already shot a man in cold blood, climbing into bed with the enemy. The victim of this entire Caucasian skullduggery is an innocent and hapless Hopi boy.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

When Chee manages to get Cowboy Dashee to the pool beside the Salt Woman Shrine, there is still no sign of Bernie. Chee leaves Cowboy to wait for the rescue helicopter, while he goes to search for Bernie. When Chee asks Cowboy if he has enough water for the wait, Cowboy nods toward the towering, anvil-shaped thunderheads \ building overhead and says he doesn't think they will have to worry much longer about having enough water.

Chee quickly finds Bernie's tracks and follows them, but he becomes concerned when he sees two additional sets of tracks along the same trail. He follows the tracks to the entrance to a wide side canyon and finds yet another set of tracks of small moccasins. What alarms the sergeant most is that there are no tracks coming back out of the canyon.

Chee follows the tracks into the side canyon. Bernie's tracks disappear, and an investigation reveals that Bernie climbed up a slope to the entrance of very narrow slot canyon. Its entrance is protected by a thorny bush called Cat's Claw Acacias—a bane to sheep and cattle herders throughout the American Southwest. Just as Chee enters the slot, the heavens tremble with thunder and erupt with a sudden downpour of small hail.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

This chapter mainly sets the stage for the following adventures. The characters are drawn from various locations in the Grand Canyon to the terminal center of the vortex that brought them to the canyon floor: the cave of the old shaman. Somewhat surprising is the absence of Joe Leaphorn.





# Chapter 22

## Chapter 22 Summary

Inside the slot canyon, Bernie reflects that it wasn't a cave as she first thought. The slot is one of hundreds of routes that rainwater takes on its way to the Colorado River, and eventually to the Pacific Ocean. Over many years, these slots have been cut a full mile down from the surface by relentless storms. At first, she looks straight up to see a narrow strip of blue sky more than 5,000 feet above, but the view becomes obscured by thunderheads. She had looked up to avoid seeing again the mummified remains of the old shaman that she had just stumbled over, but her neck muscles cramp in pain, and she is forced to look at him. The old Hopi had rolled off a ledge that he used as a bed and died, perhaps the victim of a stroke or heart attack.

After she gathers her wits, Bernie continues into the slot canyon, using her flashlight sparingly to preserve battery life. Soon, she spots a series of glittering objects arranged along the canyon wall. She discovers that the objects are little tins of *Truly Sweet*, "The World's Mildest Dipping Snuff," presumably empty and displayed for their decorative qualities. As she approaches the tins, which are arranged in two vertical rows, she sees that something separates the two lines of glitter. It is a human arm bone, and she has no doubt as to whom the bone once belonged. As she investigates, Bernie discovers that the contain diamonds instead of tobacco. Ecstatic with her discovery, and the solution to the mystery and Billy Tuve's plight, Bernie races toward the slot's entrance to go find Chee and Cowboy. Before she reaches the entrance to the slot, however, she hears the voices of Chandler and Joanna.

## Chapter 22 Analysis

As the storm clouds gather, the plot thickens. All of the main players are now either in the slot canyon or on their way. Bernie's discovery of the slot canyon, the diamonds and the arm seems in some ways anticlimactic. The heavy foreshadowing in the previous chapters has left little opportunity for surprise. The course of events from here to the end of the tale seems predictable. This may seem odd to some fans of the mystery genre, but Hillerman's fans may be accustomed to it. The author at times seems motivated more by a desire to educate and convince than to pen a good mystery.



# Chapter 23

## Chapter 23 Summary

Chandler chastises Joanne for talking loudly, reminding her that they are following a set of tracks. They proceed with stealth. Bernie hears their voices and tries to hide, but she backs herself into a niche with no exit. Chandler reminds Joanna that there is a lot of money involved in the quest and they should expect it to attract dangerous people.

Lightning and thunder punctuate their progress up the slot canyon. As Chandler shines his flashlight over the walls, the beam picks up the glitter of the snuff tins. Before they can investigate, however, he and Joanna discover the corpse of the old shaman. Chandler automatically assumes someone has killed him, but Joanna says, "Look at him. Maybe it was just time." As they swing the light around, they discover more of Bernie's footprints. They approach the array of snuff tins and Chandler says, "Those must be my diamonds." Joanna notices his use of the singular possessive pronoun and reflects that she never really thought he would share them. Nonetheless, she is more interested in the arm than the stones. Joanna tries to talk Chandler into putting away his gun, but he laughs, saying they might still need it. She argues that he should return her own gun if there is still danger, but he decides that would not be a good idea.

## Chapter 23 Analysis

Chandler continues to prove himself a cad as he declares the diamonds his own, not remembering his deal with Joanna. As he nears his goal, his greed increases. Since he has no intention of allowing Joanna to live, he will of course not give her back her gun. The conflicting assumptions about the old man's death link Joanna closer than Chandler to Native American ways when she recognizes that it may have "just been his time" to die. Chandler illustrates the cynicism of the white man by assuming it was murder.



## Chapter 24

### Chapter 24 Summary

While hiding in the recesses of the slot canyon, Bernie speculates about the case. Leaphorn had told her that the diamonds are involved in a court battle important enough to attract the FBI. She spies on Joanna and Chandler long enough to determine they are armed and dangerous. Guns are prohibited in the canyon by Park Service regulations, and she assumes the two are not tourists. Bernie observes that "in the white man's world" anything worth a lot of money attracts dangerous people. As she cowers in her niche, lightning illuminates the pair of interlopers. When Bernie sees the man holding the arm bones and his gun, she realizes that she should make a plan.

### Chapter 24 Analysis

The story progresses along predictable lines, and Hillerman takes another swipe at the "white man's world."



# Chapter 25

## Chapter 25 Summary

Joanna admonishes Chandler for treating her father's arm with disrespect. She orders him to put it down, but he laughs and tells her that he is looking forward to waving it in Plymale's face when he collects his bonus. He tells Joanna that he will give her the arm if he can have all of the diamonds, to which she replies, "I don't care about the damned diamonds. Give me my father's bone!" Chandler is taken aback by Joanna's remark, but ultimately agrees. Concerned about the third person in the slot canyon, he sends Joanna to look for her. Joanna says she will go look for the hidden woman, but requests that Chandler return her pistol in case the woman is dangerous. Chandler replies that if he did that, Joanna might become dangerous. On her way up the slope, Joanna encounters Bernie walking down—apparently equipped with a plan.

## Chapter 25 Analysis

Chapter 25 brings the elements, characters and dynamics closer together at the epicenter of the vortex and builds toward a climactic crescendo. The storm is brewing. Bernie is about to meet Joanna and Chandler. The arm and diamonds have been discovered, and Sergeant Chee of the Hopi Dismounted Calvary is on the way to save the day.



# Chapter 26

## Chapter 26 Summary

Bernie immediately assumes a commanding presence when she harshly orders Joanna to turn off the flashlight Joanna is shining in her eyes. She demands to know what the couple is doing there, noting that she heard conversation about a pistol and that guns are prohibited in the national park. She demands that they surrender the firearm. She also demands to see their visitor permits, "the form they gave you when you checked in and got permission to come down here without an authorized Park Service guide." Chandler laughs at Bernie's bluff and demands to see her credentials. Bernie insists that he surrender his weapon first. Chandler withdraws his pistol and points it at Bernie. Still bluffing, Bernie says she's working undercover and doesn't have her badge. Chandler has Joanna pat Bernie down to ensure she is unarmed. Chandler then shows Bernie his bounty hunter badge, but jerks it away before she can study it.

Lightning flashes in the canyon, and Bernie notices that the streambed in the floor now carries a thin sheet of water, a phenomenon she had seen many times after the "male rains" of summer. As Bernie and Joanna watch, Chandler begins harvesting diamonds from the display of snuff tins. He drops each diamond into a sock he has retrieved from his pack, casting the snuff tins aside. Later, he fills the toe and heel of another sock with gems and ties the two together, creating a handy rope-like diamond carrier. Bernie watches the water gradually rise as she and Joanna wait for Chandler to finish picking diamonds. She recalls that there is a dirt and stone dam created by a landslide upstream, where she had been hiding. She surmises that everything in the slot canyon will be washed violently out to the Colorado River when the dam breaks. Chandler finishes his diamond harvest and shares that he calculates the diamonds to be worth about \$1.5 million. Thunder drowns out the rest of his words.

Water starts dripping into the canyon as the storm moves directly overhead. Popcorn hail peppers them, and the flow on the floor widens. Bernie runs to the now-rushing stream to rescue Chandler's backpack. She quickly slips Joanna's pistol out of the pack and into her pocket. Chandler thanks Bernie for saving his pack and for keeping Joanna's pistol from getting wet. He informs her that it is useless, because he has removed the clip.

There is a lingering medley of lightning and thunder, and then another sound fills the slot canyon. The dam upstream rumbles and shrieks as it begins to break. The stream quickly rises in volume and velocity. As Bernie watches, Chandler panics and rushes down the canyon to look for a place to climb out of the water's path. He is not successful. Bernie grabs Joanna's arm, saying that she knows a place where they will be safe. They retreat to the ledge that was the old shaman's sleeping place. They climb onto the ledge just as the water starts to sweep their feet away. When they are safe, Bernie notes that Joanna has rescued her pack. Given the urgency of the moment, Bernie asks Joanna why she had bothered. Joanna unzips her pack, extracts the arm

bones and tearfully explains, "This is what I came for. Now I can prove I'm my father's daughter."

## **Chapter 26 Analysis**

This is the action chapter where all the elements that have been carefully prepared up to this point come together. The arm is safe; the diamonds are gone with Chandler, who faces an uncertain fate; and Bernie, the Navajo, has rescued Joanna and her bone. His greed and the forces of nature sweep Chandler away. Sergeant Chee has yet to join the fray, but may be expected to do so forthwith. Joanna escapes the wrath of nature because her motive of saving her father's arm is nobler than Chandler's greed.



# Chapter 27

## Chapter 27 Summary

Jim Chee reflects on the first time he came to the Grand Canyon floor. He had viewed the Colorado River drainage system as a mirror image of the human vascular system. The Colorado was the artery, and all of the little canyons were capillaries feeding into it. He predicts that the runoff from the lava mesas above, magnified by the force of gravity, would be spectacular. He huddles in a niche by the entrance to the slot canyon, barely protected from the pounding rain that now inundates the canyon. His prediction proves accurate as the water pours into the canyon and rushes in torrents out of the slot canyon.

Chee watches debris flush out of the slot canyon, filled with foreboding about the fate of his fiancé. First, a wooden bucket comes out; then a hat and some clothing. Behind that, tossed in the tumult of the violent current, comes an emaciated and mummified corpse. "Skeleton Man," Chee mutters as the body shoots past. A moment after the corpse, a man shoots out, struggling, trying to swim. Chee leaps to his feet to answer the man's cries for help. The man manages to grasp a branch with one hand, but refuses to relinquish what looks like a rope in his other hand. Chee admonishes the man to use both hands to hang on, but the man will not. The rope catches on a bramble bush; over Chee's protests, he tries to jerk it free. He finally succeeds in pulling the rope free, and the torrent washes him toward the Colorado River.

Chee speculates on what is happening to the man. The flood is so powerful he can hear it rolling boulders along the bottom of the canyon. The boulders, of course, could kill the man, but he was still floating and trying to swim, so Chee speculates that he will avoid that fate. Chee recalls a big drop-off about a mile downstream, which would by now be a violent waterfall. He speculates that the man will not survive that ordeal; that he will be washed down to the next waterfall, and the next, and so on until, possibly, he comes to rest behind Boulder Dam. Ten minutes later, the torrent subsides enough to enter the slot canyon, and Chee wades upstream, yelling for Bernie.

## Chapter 27 Analysis

Hillerman's themes of the white man's greed and the more practical nature of the Hopi philosophy come to fruition in Chapter 27. This concludes the action sequences promised in the heavy foreshadowing of preceding chapters. In spite of the constant juxtaposition of Native American and Caucasian cultures, the final arbiter of man's fate turns out to be Nature. This underscores the inherent wisdom of the Hopi and Navajo cultures, which have not become separated from their natural roots by the substitution of items of symbolic wealth, such as diamonds. Diamonds notwithstanding, Mother Nature always bats last.



# Chapter 28

## Chapter 28 Summary

Bernie decides that the water has receded enough to climb down from the ledge, but Joanna is reluctant, still afraid of Chandler. Bernie assures Joanna that Chandler is gone forever and reminds her that they still have Joanna's pistol. Bernie reveals that she is a policewoman and knows how to use the pistol. She notices that she didn't say "former policewoman," and that she feels pride when she says it. As the two women ease their way off their perch, they hear a voice. Bernie immediately recognizes it Chee's. After they are reunited, the happy couple banters about their plans for the future. Bernie reveals that she has reconsidered the apartment idea and would be willing to live in Jim Chee's trailer.

## Chapter 28 Analysis

The most revealing element in Chapter 28 is Bernie's pride in thinking of herself as a policewoman. It may be that, in spite of her feelings for Jim, she is not quite ready to settle down. Jim Chee has already been established as a good-looking young man with an active libido, but one who has been a failure in several previous attempts to form a lasting relationship. Often in his own thoughts, he laments that he will always be lonely in spite of the beautiful women who find their way into his bed. His quest for marital bliss is also hampered by Jim's desire to become a shaman. Hillerman may be setting Jim up to fail in love again by re-instilling Bernie's love of the adventurous life of a Navajo Tribal Policewoman.





## Chapter 29

### Chapter 29 Summary

Joe Leaphorn and his cronies are still sitting around the Navajo Inn diner, discussing the Skeleton Man case. Jim and Bernie were indeed married in a traditional Navajo ceremony, and now live in Jim's trailer. Sherman, whom Joanna shot, survived the ordeal, but did not reveal who shot him. He claimed it was an accident. Apparently, there were some questions about what he was doing at the Grand Canyon, but Joe thinks the man's pride wouldn't permit him to admit that he'd been shot by a woman using his own gun.

### Chapter 29 Analysis

This anticlimactic chapter ends the tale of *Skeleton Man*, tying up the loose ends, and leaving the door open for the next episode with these long-standing characters.



# Characters

## Jim Chee

Jim Chee is a sergeant with the Navajo Tribal Police. He is well known by the local characters, and is engaged to Bernie Manuelito. He is a good friend and colleague of Cowboy Dashee, a Hopi. Whenever they are together, there is a good deal of good-natured bantering between the two. Chee is also the protégé of Joe Leaphorn, the ostensible narrator of *Skeleton Man*, but who does not play a major role here. Jim agrees to help his friend Cowboy prove the innocence of Billy Tuve, Cowboy's nephew, who has been charged with the murder and robbery of a jewelry storeowner. Jim is portrayed as a man unlucky in love who has rejected at least two white fiancés because they insisted on removing him from his native Southwest and turning him into a model "white Indian." Although most of his friends tell him it is impractical, Jim still entertains childhood dreams of becoming a shaman for his Navajo people.

## Joanna Craig

Joanna is a woman on a quest. Well-to-do in her own right, she seeks to restore a fortune that was extorted from her mother by the attorney who managed her grandfather's affairs, Dan Plymale. Joanna's father, John Clarke, was aboard one of the airliners that collided over the Grand Canyon in 1956. Joanna's mother had been pregnant with Joanna from an affair with the widower Clarke when he died in the crash. Clark was on his way back to New York to marry Joanna's mother, and was carrying a magnificent diamond for her wedding ring. He was also carrying a case containing other exquisite and specially cut diamonds handcuffed to his wrist. Clarke was transporting the stones for his father, who was a renowned gem broker from a rich old family. The old man hated Joanna's mother, thinking her a gold digger after his fortune. After Clarke died in the crash, the old man treated Joanna's mother cruelly and refused to admit that Joanna was his son's heir. Joanna is driven to find her father's arm more than the diamonds. DNA from the arm, marked by a metal pin installed in the wrist after a childhood accident, will allow her to prove her lineage, regain the lost fortune and ruin Plymale.

## Brad Chandler

Brad Chandler is the icon of all that is despicable in western white men. He is the black sheep of a wealthy family, disowned because of violent and uncivilized behavior. He works as a bounty hunter with a reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness. He has killed several of his targets, sometimes with the tacit approval of legitimate law enforcers, and is the suspect in a Seattle murder case. That case went cold after the key witness developed "health problems." Dan Plymale hires Chandler to stop Joanna Craig in her quest for her father's arm. Without proof that Joanna is John Clarke's daughter, his



fortune was bequeathed to a bogus charity that Plymale controls. Plymale tells Chandler that he is less interested in the diamonds than in preventing Joanna from proving her lineage. He will pay Chandler his regular fee plus expenses and a \$20,000 bonus if he succeeds. Chandler Plymale's cohort, but he resents and envies the luxury that surrounds his client. He quickly begins to develop plans to double cross his double-crossing boss and snag the diamonds.



## Objects/Places

### The Grand Canyon

The canyon is the location for the climactic action at the end of the novel.

### Second Mesa

Billy Tuve's home is on the Second Mesa.

### The Navajo Inn

A coffee shop where Joe Leaphorn and his cronies meet to recall the tale of the *Skeleton Man*.

### Short Mountain

Shorty McGinnis runs the trading post at this desolate location.

### The El Rancho Motel

The location of Billy Tuve's interrogation by Joanna Craig.

### Diamonds

A case of diamonds was lost in a 1956 mid-air collision over the Grand Canyon. They become the focus of the various characters for different motives.

### Snuff Tins

The old shaman who found the diamonds encases them in decorative snuff tins to build a

shrine in a hidden slot canyon within the Grand Canyon.

### John Craig's Arm

The diamond case was cuffed to John Clarke's arm when the planes collided in 1956. DNA from the arm can prove that Clarke was Joanna Craig's father and help her claim her inheritance.



## **Entrenching Tool**

Billy Tuve traded this Army Surplus item to the Shaman for a diamond.

## **Hunting Knife with Scabbard**

A cowboy named Reno traded the knife and scabbard to the old shaman for one of the diamonds.

# Themes

## Relative Cultural and Individual Values

The theme of the relative values of different cultures is present in virtually every chapter of *Skeleton Man*. Native American cultures are portrayed as rich in their appreciation of the wonders of nature. They believe in a world in which man neither dominates nor fears the parched lands, violent storms and untamed rivers, but lives in close harmony with that which is controlled by unseen forces. The white man is portrayed as naïve, crass and almost comical in his arrogance toward nature and his attempts to control it. The white man is viewed as a strong but bumbling child or puppy given to foolish behaviors and temper tantrums. The inherent respect of the Hopi and Navajo for all things natural, and for all cultures, prevents outright condemnation of the white man, but it does permit some serious head shaking and eye rolling.

## Differing Perspectives

Perspective is the lens through which people view the world, and is determined by individual circumstances as well as the individual's culture. The pivotal event responsible for all of the action in *Skeleton Man* is an airliner collision over the Grand Canyon in 1956. Air travel on a mass scale was relatively new in 1956, and such an incident, killing more than 150 people, had never occurred before. The white man saw this as a terrible mishap of technology and sought technological and regulatory solutions. In real life, the incident triggered the creation of the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA). How might this incident have been viewed by the Hopi, Navajo and other native cultures in the area, especially those living in the Grand Canyon? Hillerman suggests one interpretation in the persona of Masaw, or Skeleton Man, the Kachina spirit that taught the Hopi not to fear death. Masaw's disciple, the old shaman, saw the incident as a sign from the other world, and the diamonds and John Clarke's arm validated his interpretation, which led him to found a religious sect. Consider what it might have been like to have lived in an aboriginal society at the bottom of the Grand Canyon when suddenly bodies, parts of bodies, luggage, personal items, airliner seats, metal and a plethora of other white-man inventions fell from the sky.

## Power of Belief

Hillerman uses an amalgam of Native American belief systems to weave a consistent theme throughout *Skeleton Man*. Hillerman never actually promotes Native American beliefs over Caucasian ones, but he implies several times that even the sophisticated Jim Chee and Cowboy Dashee harbor a lingering respect for the old spiritual ways. In other Native American characters, those with lives less sullied by the influence of white culture, the beliefs are absolute and inviolable. The three-way conversation between Chee, Dashee and the receptionist at the jail concerning the Zuni rodeo may be the best



example of this. Chee, Dashee and the receptionist find humor in the fact that the Zuni always hold the rain dance before the rodeo, and the rodeo is always rained out. Although they laugh at this, there seems to be a serious side to their humor. On the other hand, the Zuni, holding close to their traditional beliefs, are quite serious when they reply that the cowboys escape injury, and the tribe saves on medical expenses, when the rodeo is rained out.

# Style

## Point of View

The tale of the *Skeleton Man* is told in the third person. Joe Leaphorn, the detective retired from the Navajo Tribal Police, is the ostensible narrator. The novel begins with Joe and his coffee buddies sitting around the Navajo Inn diner rehashing the details of the Skeleton Man case. Joe's voice carries the tale through Chapter 2, but then the narrative changes to the "God's Eye" omniscient view. Joe's narrative voice does not return until the final chapter, except for a few scenes in which he is actively involved, to tie up the loose ends in a post narrative summary. Throughout the rest of the novel, although the narrative is generally omniscient, other characters have the opportunity to view events through their eyes. This proves an effective way to describe the topography, weather, flora and fauna of the Grand Canyon, particularly the canyon floor.

## Setting

*Skeleton Man* is set in the current year. It is the latest of a long series of mysteries featuring many of the same characters. While all of the action of the living characters might have occurred yesterday, the charm of the tale hinges on the 1956 air collision over the Grand Canyon and the ways and traditions and of half-a-dozen Native American aboriginal cultures, from Anasazi to Zuni, that are probably thousands of years old. This juxtaposition of times and cultures is a Hillerman trademark that lends a credibility to his works. It is uncommon in the genre, and it enables him to pursue his objective of educating his readers in the nuances of Native American culture and traditions. Hillerman also uses the short-term flashback to bring temporarily dormant characters up to speed.

## Language and Meaning

Hillerman uses language to illustrate the differences between Caucasian and Native American cultures and views. Although the entire novel is in English, Hillerman uses syntax and innuendo to capture the patient and accepting Native American attitude that is based in the phenomena of nature rather than the machinations of man. Caucasians are portrayed through their speech patterns as almost frenetic, while Native Americans speak in a voice that exudes patience and reflection. The Native Americans provide long, detailed interpretations of current events, often referring to ancient wisdom, myths and legends. While there is a good deal of good-natured bantering between the native characters of different tribes, it is always respectful and set in a common appreciation for nature.





## Structure

*Skeleton Man* is presented in 29 chapters of similar length and a fairly straightforward chronology. Hillerman changes scene, setting and characters from chapter to chapter to paint a broad picture of events that occur in different times and places. This structure creates a modular presentation, rather than a seamless, flowing narrative. The first two chapters and Chapter 29 create bookends for all that transpires between them. Each of those three chapters is set in the Navajo Inn diner, with Joe Leaphorn and his coffee cronies rehashing the details of the case of the Skeleton Man. Hillerman has a gift for juxtaposing things modern and ancient to illustrate their common and divergent elements. He does this even with the title *Skeleton Man*. The missing arm of John Clarke, the diamond currier who died in the plane collision, represents the modern Skeleton Man. Matwa, the Kachina spirit that taught the Hopi not to fear death, is the Native American Skeleton Man. In the concluding chapters, Hillerman artfully weaves these two interpretations together in the creation of an old shaman who forms a death cult when the sky rains detritus of the mid-air collision on the Grand Canyon's floor.



## Quotes

"She parked where Chee's car would have been, got out, leaned against the door, and studied the place. The trailer looked as dented, grimy, and decrepit as she remembered. However, the windows were clean; she noticed, and she credited Jim with that since he was the only occupant. The axles, where the wheels would be replaced when time came to move, were covered with canvas to protect them from rain, rust, or whatever would damage such machinery. The little "pet flap" Chee had installed on the bottom of the entry door was still there even though the cat was long since gone."

"The flap revived a memory of how Chee's mind worked. The cat, pregnant and abandoned by a tourist, had been chased up one of the trees shading his trailer. Chee had rescued it. While refusing to adopt it as a pet (which would violate nature's sacred relationship between human and feline), he had arranged a feeding and watering place near his door, giving her some chance to survive until she learned rural ways while respecting her right to be a free and independent cat-and not a slave to his human species. After Cat, as Chee named it, barely escaped another coyote attack, he cut the hole in his door, attached the flap, and kept it open with the feeding dish just inside until Cat established her habit of coming in to eat, drink, or elude coyotes. But the arrangement remained strictly formal."

"About ten feet down the aluminum-siding from the door, a metal patch had been taped to the wall, covering a hole."

"A deranged woman, thinking Chee was a Skinwalker and had witched her, had blasted the hole (just over the cot where Chee slept) with her shotgun. Cat, ears attuned to stalking coyotes, heard the intruder coming and dived under the flap, awakening Chee and, as Chee told the story, saving his life."

"Remembering Chee telling his version of Cat's heroism caused Bernadette Manuelito to produce her first smile of the day. She walked around the trailer, trotted up the four steps to the plank patio he'd attached to the river side of it, sat in his deck chair, and considered the view."

"Well, now, look what the wind blew in. I was hoping we'd finally get some rain."

Dashee said, 'It's coming. Today is the day the Zuni have their rodeo. They did their rain dance last night.'"

"Chee rescued his cap, said, 'Hello, Mrs. Sosi.' Mrs. Sosi was laughing. 'I asked one of them about that last year when they got rained out again. Told him they should do the dance after the rodeo. He said the rainouts kept the cowboys from getting hurt. Cut down on the medical bills. Did you two come in to get out of the weather?'"



"Bradford Chandler suddenly swiveled in his beach chair to keep the sea breeze out of his ear. The old bastard had finally said something interesting. Something about diamonds?"

"Chandler had let his mind wander away from this rambling conversation, just enjoying the feel of the sand blown against the bottom of his bare feet by the Caribbean wind, and the sensation of the sun on his legs, and the sight of the nicely tanned and very shapely girl strolling along the surf line clad in a string bikini and not much else. Thinking of her as prey. Thinking of himself as predator. Enjoying, too, just being here on this very private beach, and his memory of the polished limo pulling up beside the old bastard's private jet with the big black driver holding the door open for him. Savoring the feel of luxury. Knowing that was the way fate intended it to be for Bradford Chandler. And that was the way it wasn't. Not yet."

"'Diamonds?' Chandler said. 'You don't expect diamonds in that part of the world. Where did they come from?'"

"'Mr. Chandler.' The old man's tone was impatient now. 'You haven't been paying attention. My interest is in one diamond. If I knew where it came from, you wouldn't be sitting in the shade here ogling one of my women.'"

"The old man was Dan Plymale, sitting in a recliner chair and sharing the shade of a huge beach umbrella just to Brad Chandler's left, taking off his sunglasses now and staring at Chandler, his broad, tanned face stern, his hair and his eyebrows dead white, his eyes a pale and icy blue, Reminding Chandler of his deceased father, Bradford Churchill Chandler Sr. Plymale was another of their kind of people, Part of the Anglo-Saxon, Nordic ruling class. Or "we predator people," as his dad would have proudly put it."

"From this, a comparatively cool downdraft flowed, bringing with it the aroma of the high-country flora—pinion resin, cliff rose, and the slightly acid smell of claretcup cactus. It was comfortable and pleasant here. The bedrock under her feet was damp with a minuscule trickle of water from a narrow horizontal seepage between layers of stone on the opposite wall. A swarm of midges was dining on a growth of moss there, and below them squatted one of the spotted toads common to the deep canyon. He sat so utterly motionless that Bernie wondered for a moment if he was alive. He answered that question with a sudden leap, and scuttled across the stony floor."

"Why? Bernie quickly saw the answer. The head of a small snake emerged from under a fallen slab, slithered onto the bedrock floor after the toad. It stopped. Coiled. Swiveled its head and its tongue emerged, testing the air for the strange odor of Bernie, a new species of intruder in the snake's hunting ground."

"Bernie had been conditioned from toddling years to look upon everything alive as fellow citizens of a tough and unforgiving natural cosmos. Each and all, be they schoolgirl, scorpion, bobcat, or vulture, had a role to play and was endowed with the good sense to survive, provided good sense was used. Thus Bernie was not afraid of snakes. Even



rattlesnakes, which this one obviously was, because after coiling he had raised his terminal tip and sent his species' nameplate warning signal."

"But this one was pink, which brought a huge smile to Bernie's face and the immediate thought of Dr. William Degenhardt, her favorite professor at the University of New Mexico."



## Topics for Discussion

Throughout *Skeleton Man*, Hillerman repeatedly contrasts Native American cultures with a stereotypical Caucasian culture. In every case, the Native ways are portrayed as sensible, understanding of fellow creatures, and entirely within the context of nature. Conversely, the white man's culture is depicted as greedy, selfish, motivated by a desire for wealth and power and more or less oblivious to nature. In short, he paints Native American culture as good and pristine, while painting Caucasian culture as evil and inferior. Do you believe this is an accurate portrayal?

Do you think that some of Mr. Hillerman's distaste for white men's culture is nostalgia for the simple but robust days of his youth when he ran wild, in a positive sense, with his Pottawatomie and Seminole playmates? What grown man would not look back nostalgically at such a past?

Is the author's juxtaposition of modern and Native American Cultures a reluctant acceptance that the idyllic world of Native American culture, despite its appeal, is simply not viable in the modern world?

Political correctness often affects the sale of popular published works. Do you believe that the author or publisher is trying to increase book sales by appealing to popular political trends that diminish American and European cultures in favor of more pristine belief systems?

The diamonds and snuff tins in *Skeleton Man* are symbols of competing values. As mere symbols, their value depends on the perspective, needs and purposes of the individual that encounters them.

What do the diamonds represent to Chandler, Plymale and Sherman?

What do the diamonds represent to Joanna Craig? To Billy Tuve?

What do the snuff tins represent to the old shaman?

Is there symbolic significance in the fact that white men manufactured the snuff cans that encase diamonds formed by nature?

The story of Cat is an allegory, a literary device by which an author portrays one thing to illuminate another. The allegory is often associated with a spiritual concept that is illustrated through the actions of imagined characters behaving in symbolic ways.

What is the symbolic meaning of the manner in which Cat's original owners treated her?

Why did Jim Chee refuse to make Cat a pet?

What is the symbolic meaning of a de-clawed cat in this allegory?

How does the story of Cat relate to Jim Chee's lack of success with white lovers?

Which human character in Skeleton Man does Cat represent?