

Skinwalkers Short Guide

Skinwalkers by Tony Hillerman

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Characters

Although Joe Leaphorn dominates three earlier novels — *The Blessing Way* (1970), *Dance Hall of the Dead* (1973), and *Listening Woman* (1977) — Hillerman adds still more depth to his characterization of Leaphorn in *Skinwalkers*. Described in detail is Leaphorn's corkboard-mounted office map of "Indian Country" with his written annotations and the colored pins with which he marks crime locations. A symbol of Leaphorn's legendary eccentricity and rationalism, the map proves invaluable when it reveals connections between three seemingly unrelated killings.

Jim Chee also appears in his own set of early Hillerman novels. A police officer whose interest in his heritage is so strong that he is learning to perform a complicated Navajo ceremonial sing, Chee ironically is mistaken for a skinwalker and nearly killed. The attempt on his life precipitates the investigation that brings him together with Leaphorn to work on the same case. Chee is described physically from Leaphorn's point of view as "destined to be a skinny old man." This depiction is consistent with Hillerman's preferred method of characterization — the succinct description or personality sketch.

Minor characters are delineated with a phrase or two or a brief description of physical traits or characteristic speech patterns. In some cases, a character is labeled by a distinguishing costume, attitude, or posture — thus Janet Pete, the lawyer, is initially introduced from Chee's perspective as "Silk Shirt," and the no-nonsense owner of a remote trading post is known as "Iron Woman."



Social Concerns

In *Skinwalkers*, Hillerman highlights the clash between Navajo beliefs and white skepticism, a conflict caused by the intrusion of the modern world into traditional native American culture. At issue is the Navajo belief in the skinwalker, a witch who possesses the power to fly, to run faster than the wind, and to become a dog or a wolf.

Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, both Navajos, educated in state universities in the white man's world, and both policemen, embody the collision between old tribal beliefs and modern-day skepticism as they investigate a series of killings seemingly perpetrated by a skinwalker. Leaphorn represents logical thinking, rational questioning, and a healthy doubt about the existence of skinwalkers. Chee is more involved with traditional culture and religion, more intuitive and idealistic, more troubled at the encroachment of Western culture, and more inclined to attach importance to stories about the existence of skinwalkers.

Also personifying the conflict between white and Native Americans are Irma Onesalt, a social worker and one of the murder victims, and Dr. Bahe Yellowhorse, founder and chief benefactor of the Bad Water Clinic that provides free medical care on the reservation. Onesalt seems to have spent her last days investigating possible Medicare abuses at the clinic; Yellowhorse justifies overcharging the government by reminding himself that the Native American population has yet to receive most of what the government promised them in the Fort Sumner treaty.

Techniques

As in his earlier novels, Hillerman interweaves the beliefs and customs of the Navajo throughout the plot of *Skinwalkers*, creating a tapestry of culture that forms the backdrop to the often violent and puzzling incidents that demand the investigative talents of Leaphorn and Chee. Incorporated into the narrative are clan tales, genealogies, local folklore, even words and phrases in the Navajo tongue — all elements that lend authenticity to the novel and depth to the characters.

Hillerman also uses interior monologue — in this novel to characterize a desperate mother whose baby is dying from a congenital defect and to provide motivation for Jim Chee's often impulsive decisions — and impressionistic description — to evoke the dry beauty of the desert, the blackness of night, the smell of rain over a butte. Most characteristic of Hillerman's prose is its evocation of locale, its creation of the ambiance and moods of the Southwest desert country with its dry creek beds, mesas and buttes, rocky peaks, and dramatic sunrises and sunsets. Hillerman peoples his fictional landscape with characters whose stark lives he sketches in the vivid detail that he uses to highlight human presence in a vast landscape.



Key Questions

Hillerman's novels about Chee and Leaphorn are fun to discuss, as well as to read. Mystery fans love the interaction of the main characters with the sometimes conflicting cultures of the Navajo and America-at-large. *Skinwalkers* offers ample material for stimulating discussions of cultural beliefs at variance with one another, for instance the Navajo supernatural beliefs that differ from those of Leaphorn and other police investigators. By placing Chee and Leaphorn in the same novel, Hillerman emphasizes the differing approaches to living represented by Chee's immersion in the Navajo culture and Leaphorn's rationalistic views. The characterizations are fun, the conflicts are interesting, and the mystery is engrossing, making *Skinwalkers* ideal for group discussions.

1. Should Chee learn to live in Landon's world? Should Landon learn to live in his? Which one is right?
 2. How well depicted is cultural conflict in the novel? Does Hillerman take sides?
 3. What is the Fort Sumner treaty? 4. Who is the better detective, Chee or Leaphorn?
 5. How important is Navajo folklore to the plot of the novel?
 6. How good are Hillerman's descriptions in *Skinwalkers*? Do you have a favorite one? What do you like about it?
 7. Is the mystery complicated?
- Would it be interesting even without the cultural setting Hillerman provides?

Literary Precedents

Like much of Hillerman's work, *Skinwalkers* owes something to the mystery subgenre, the police procedural novel. Leaphorn and Chee are law enforcement professionals dedicated to discovering the truth as they work within the restricting rules and procedures of a frustrating bureaucracy. Leaphorn is a descendant of a long line of fictional policemen whose careful methodology and incisive thinking are distinct assets in the crime-solving game. He belongs with other famous police officers characterized in fiction — Tibbett, Wexford, Beef, Alleyn, and their colleagues.

Chee, on the other hand, represents the maverick cop, the individualist who gets results by bending the rules and trusting his own intuition. In his tendency to involve himself deeply in a case he resembles Martha Grimes's Richard Jury; in his unorthodox approaches to problems he joins the fraternity of the gifted and curious amateur sleuth — men like Carolus Dean and occasionally Lord Peter Wimsey.

Related Titles

Previous Hillerman novels featured either Lt. Joe Leaphorn or Officer Jim Chee, but in *Skinwalkers* the two policemen are brought together to work on a peculiar group of murders that point to the involvement of Navajo witchcraft.

Hillerman pairs Leaphorn's legendary reluctance to give credence to things occult with Chee's strong affinity for Navajo tradition and ceremony, thus creating an investigative team that combines the best of two cultures.

Throughout the novel, Jim Chee is forced to examine his feelings about Mary Landon, the blond, blue-eyed schoolteacher with whom he has been emotionally involved but who has returned to her native Wisconsin. Their relationship, which flourished in the earlier Chee novels, is disintegrating under the weight of their individual cultural loyalties. Chee's attempts to come to terms with Mary's refusal to live on the reservation and her insistence that he learn to live in her world are complicated by his growing friendship with an attractive young Navajo lawyer, Janet Pete.

Emma Leaphorn, whose calming presence and direct approach to life have helped her husband work his way through several difficult cases, is slowly succumbing to what Leaphorn believes to be Alzheimer's disease. She no longer recognizes him and his anguish at watching her deterioration threatens to undermine his famed objective and intellectual approach to crime-solving.



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