

# **Talking God Study Guide**

## **Talking God by Tony Hillerman**

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## Plot Summary

Talking God is a gripping mystery by Tony Hillerman, set in the American Southwest and Washington, DC, and involving two of Hillerman's famous detectives, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Office Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police. Leaphorn and Chee each investigate a mystery that leads them to the nation's capitol, where they join forces to uncover a terrorist plot involving Indian artifacts and a priceless golden jewel-encrusted Inca mask. Together, the two heroes defuse a bomb at a crowded Smithsonian exhibit and return the Navajo Yeibichai or Talking God mask to its rightful owners.

Officer Jim Chee attends a Night Chant, or Yeibichai, ceremony in the American Southwest, where he must arrest a white man named Henry Highhawk, a conservator at the Smithsonian. Highhawk has been charged with desecrating graves in New England, in protest of the Smithsonian's policies on keeping Indian skeletons. Chee's friend Janet Pete, who lives in Washington, DC, volunteers to represent Highhawk.

When Janet Pete believes she is being followed, she calls on Jim Chee for help. Chee travels to Washington, DC, where he learns that Highhawk is, for unknown reasons, creating exact replicas of several Indian artifacts, including a Yeibichai mask and a Tano War God fetish. Chee visits Highhawk at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History one night after hours, where the conservator mysteriously disappears. Chee searches unsuccessfully for him and eventually leaves, noticing that the security guard's desk is also unattended.

Meanwhile, middle-aged Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police is investigating another crime. FBI agent Jay Kennedy asks Leaphorn to help him solve the mystery of the fully dressed body of a man inexplicably left in the middle of the desert. There are no footprints nearby to indicate how the man got there. The man's wallet and dentures are also missing, making identification impossible.

Leaphorn contacts a friend who works for the railroad and learns that an Amtrak passenger train made an emergency stop at exactly that place on the night of the murder. Leaphorn determines that someone killed the man on the train and left his body in the desert. Taking an overdue vacation, Leaphorn travels to Washington, DC to examine the dead man's abandoned luggage for himself. It contains a notebook full of clues and a cryptic list, but no dentures. Even better, the train conductor describes the killer. Leaphorn identifies the dead man as Elogio Santillanes from a prescription number in the notebook. When Leaphorn tries to notify the dead man's family, he sees the killer in an apartment across the hall.

Office Chee and Lieutenant Leaphorn join forces in Washington, DC. Over breakfast, they realize that the two cases must be connected. They go to the Smithsonian and discover the body of Henry Highhawk, who has been murdered. Together, they uncover Henry Highhawk's connection to a plot involving terrorists and the Chilean embassy. They realize at the same instant that the Yeibichai mask in a Smithsonian exhibit is being used to conceal a bomb. Together, they defuse the bomb, saving the lives of

everyone in the crowded exhibit hall. During the melee, Office Jim Chee removes two sacred Indian artifacts from the museum and returns them to the tribes.



# Chapters 1 and 2

## Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Officer Jim Chee and Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police each independently becomes involved in a mystery that takes him from the American Southwest to Washington, DC. When the two join forces in the nation's capitol, they uncover a plot involving Navajo masks, priceless relics, a terrorist group and the Chilean embassy. The mystery is solved when the two detectives foil a bombing of the Smithsonian.

In chapter one, stylish Smithsonian lawyer Catherine Morris Perry returns to Washington, DC to find a large, ungainly brown package on her desk. Perry imperiously chides her receptionist-secretary Markie Bailey for leaving the box on her desk.

Conservator Henry Highhawk has been trying to get the museum to return skeletal remains of their ancestors to Native American tribes and aboriginal groups. Perry agrees with the museum board of directors that return and reburial of the 18,000 Native American skeletons in the museum's collection is simply impossible, given the museum's mission.

Mrs. Bailey mentions that the Chilean embassy has called. Perry reflects that no doubt it is about an "Indian-giver" situation, where a Chilean general wants the Smithsonian to return a jeweled golden mask his grandfather "lent" a major corporation. Ms. Perry is shocked to open the box on her desk to find a note and the remains of her grandparents, John Neldine Burgoyne and Jane Burgoyne.

Chapter two takes place in August, in the town of Fort Defiance, Arizona where a doctor at the Public Health Service hospital tells strong-willed, elderly Agnes Tsosie that she is dying and he can do nothing to help her. Agnes replies, "I knew that." The doctor orders her to remain at the hospital, where she can be given pain medication, but Tsosie returns home to her family. Her son-in-law Rollie lovingly arranges her bed outside in the brush arbor, where she can be under the sky and see the mountains. The family will hold an elaborate, expensive Yeibichai ceremony to honor the Talking God in honor of the dying woman.

## Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The first chapter is the only one from lawyer Catherine Morris Perry's point of view. Perry is young, chic and conscious of social position. She rebuffs her secretary's attempts to befriend her when the secretary asks personal questions.

Author Tony Hillerman foreshadows the connection between the two major plot threads of the novel by mentioning conservator Henry Highhawk and the Chilean embassy's interest in a jewel-encrusted golden mask in consecutive paragraphs. This technique



subtly links the two unrelated events in the reader's mind, so that no one is surprised later to find that they are intertwined.

Catherine Morris Perry symbolizes white Americans in this chapter. She wants the bones of her ancestors to be respected, but she does not show any respect for Native American bones. As a well-educated upper-class young white woman, Perry also looks down on almost everyone, including her secretary, Henry Highhawk and all Navajos.

Two major themes are introduced simultaneously in the first chapter. Using the phrase "Indian-giver" in a negative way underscores Perry's lack of respect for Native American culture. It also illustrates the traditional "finders keepers" view of museum artifacts - that they belong to the archaeologists who unearthed them or to the individuals or donors who gave them to the Smithsonian. This ignores the fact that such items were often obtained illegally, in effect stolen from the rightful owners.

Catherine Morris Perry cynically assumes that the Chilean general would not be interested in the ancestral mask if it were made of less valuable materials than gold and jewels. She also assumes that the general will keep the mask for himself, or perhaps melt it down and sell the valuable components, if it is returned to Chile.

Perry is the museum's mouthpiece for the official policy that skeletal remains will be returned to the Indian tribes, only if they can prove that the bones were taken from a Native American burial ground. She argues that visitors to the museum have the right to expect authentic remains, not plaster duplicates.

The author uses situational irony to underscore the contrast between Perry's calm defense of museum policy on human remains and her shock and horror that her grandparent's bones have been disinterred without her knowledge or permission.

Chapter two illustrates the contrast between the Navajo view of death and popular American culture. Agnes Tsosie knows the end is near and is willing to suffer to avoid dying in the hospital. As an older woman with great willpower, Tsosie enjoys high status among the Navajo Bitter Water Dinee, unlike Anglo-American culture where the elderly often have low social status. Tsosie has often been called upon to resolve disputes within the clan. One of her major accomplishments was resolving a century-long feud over grazing rights by keeping both families in session for eleven days until they agreed from exhaustion and hunger. Yet, Tsosie breaks tradition when it suits her. She is close to her daughter's husband Rollie Yellow, despite a Navajo prohibition that requires her to avoid her son-in-law.

Tsosie accepts death as a natural part of life rather than a defeat or medical failure. She expresses this belief through the Navajo mythology of Born for Water telling Monster Slayer to leave Death alive so that old people will be eliminated to make room for babies. The purpose of the Yeibichai ceremony is not to prevent death or cure Tsosie - it is to restore her to harmony with nature so that she can die in peace.



# Chapters 3 and 4

## Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In chapter three, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, a veteran of the Navajo Tribal Police, receives a phone call from an old friend. Gallup FBI agent Jay Kennedy asks Leaphorn to assist in investigating a body found in the desert near train tracks.

The biggest mystery is how the body came to be beside the train tracks. Kennedy wants Leaphorn to search the surrounding desert for tracks or other signs. At the crime scene, Leaphorn finds the neatly arranged body of a white man wearing a dark gray suit, white shirt, tie and pointy shoes. His clothes are high quality but worn, as if they are decades old. The victim is about sixty years old and has no teeth or dentures in his mouth. The deputy found no identification on the body, but did find a cryptic note with references to Agnes Tsosie and the Yeibichai ceremony.

When Leaphorn squats to inspect the body, his knees ache, reminding him that he no longer exercises since the death of his beloved wife, Emma. There are no tire tracks or footprints anywhere nearby to show how the man got out here in the middle of the desert. The pathologist arrives and determines the cause of death is a small, dark stab wound at the base of the skull, just above the first vertebra.

Old Lady Agnes Tsosie does not recognize the dead man in a photo. Agnes explains that she was expecting a visit from Henry Highhawk, a museum conservator who is one-fourth Navajo and wants to become a member of the tribe.

Chapter four focuses on Officer Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police. The chapter opens with Chee watching the dancers prepare for the Yeibichai or Night Chant ceremony. Chee is especially interested, because he hopes to perform the complex ceremony himself after proper training.

Chee is at the ceremony on police business, to arrest a white man who calls himself Henry Highhawk. Chee's boss, Captain Largo is particularly amused that Highhawk is wanted for desecration of graves. Officer Chee is excited to think that the FBI is willing to arrest a pot hunter. Captain Largo corrects him. Highhawk's actions are considered a crime because the remains are those of upper class white people. Chee takes his best friend Cowboy Dashee, a Deputy Sheriff for Apache County.

At the Yeibichai ceremonial, Chee must wait for hours until Highhawk arrives. He watches the ritual, then notices a white man he privately calls Man with Bad Hands. The man is apparently missing parts of several fingers and tries to disguise the deformity under black leather gloves. Finally, Henry Highhawk arrives. He is a spectacle, wearing typical 1920s Navajo attire, including a blue velvet shirt with silver buttons and a black felt reservation hat. Highhawk's blond hair is braided, a style that Navajo men do not typically wear. He is disabled and wears a metal brace on his left leg. Highhawk talks



with the shaman. Soon Bad Hands walks over and introduces himself to Highhawk. Chee and Dashee debate arresting Highhawk immediately, or waiting so they can see the rest of the ceremonial dancing. The two law enforcement officers decide to watch the rest of the ceremony.

## Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The friendship between Navajo Joe Leaphorn and the white FBI agent Jay Kennedy is so strong that Leaphorn is not offended even when his old friend falls back on cultural stereotypes. In this case, the stereotype is of the Indian tracker with almost super-human perception for footprints. As a matter of fact, Leaphorn is good at tracking - much better than Kennedy is. The author uses this method to illustrate that personal relationships transcend ethnic stereotypes, including stereotypes about Navajo culture.

When Kennedy says that he recognizes Tsosie's last name, Leaphorn reminds him that Tsosie is as common on the Navajo reservation as Kennedy is in Boston, a subtle reminder that Navajo culture predominates here. Yet, the middle-aged Leaphorn is far more pragmatic and less traditional than Officer Chee, his younger coworker, is. Leaphorn does not really subscribe to any religion, Navajo or Christian. He practices few Navajo traditions, and despite the Navajo superstition about being near dead bodies, he chooses a line of work where he is frequently investigating homicides.

Agnes Tsosie is referred to as Old Woman Tsosie and Old Lady Tsosie. In Navajo culture, these are not negative terms - they are terms of great respect. In traditional culture, simply surviving to old age suggested exceptional wisdom, skill and intelligence. Older people were the leaders of their community. Significantly, even though Agnes Tsosie lives with her daughter and son-in-law Jolene and Rollie Yellow, it is the Tsosie homestead, not the Yellow homestead. Even at her advanced age, Agnes is still the owner of the property and the matriarch.

When Agnes Tsosie says that she did not expect this stranger, Joe Leaphorn refrains from asking probing questions or interrupting her. Both are considered rude in Navajo culture - a real drawback for anyone investigating a crime. Instead, Leaphorn listens patiently until the old woman gets around to telling him about the stranger she does expect at her Yeibichai ceremony.

Henry Highhawk symbolizes all white people who think they want to become American Indian, without making the sacrifices most Native Americans have made by living on reservations. Like other "wannabees," Highhawk knows little about Navajo culture and misunderstands much of what he does know. He seems to have obtained all his information about Navajo dress and culture from the movies. His urge to become Navajo speaks more of an egotistical need to seem special and a desire to separate himself from his own Anglo-American culture than an affinity for the Native American way of life.





The theme of love lost is introduced with Leaphorn's reflections on the loss of his wife Emma. Her absence has had a profound effect on Joe. He has stopped exercising, and has considered leaving his job with the Navajo Tribal Police.

In chapter four, Officer Chee's personality is revealed. Although Chee is younger than Joe Leaphorn, he is much more traditional. Chee believes the Navajo mythology, and he is a shaman, or medicine man, who hopes to learn to perform the Night Chant ceremony. As the chapter opens, Chee seems more focused the ritual. Only later does the reader learn that Chee is at the Yeibichai ceremony on official police business: to arrest a white man. The Navajo's lack of respect for Henry Highhawk is expressed in their name for him: Flaky Man. It is never explicitly stated, but the implication is that Henry Highhawk was responsible for disinterring Catherine Morris Perry's grandparents in the first chapter.

Referencing Navajo culture, Captain Largo notes that Highhawk's desecration of the graves conflicts with his desire to be Navajo. In the Navajo tradition, the dead are tainted. No traditional Navajo would voluntarily handle a dead body or human skeleton, which is believed to cause nightmares and sickness, including sickness of the soul. Highhawk is ignorant of this Navajo religious aversion. Although Officer Chee is a shaman himself, he thinks that the Navajo religious aversion is odd.

Respect for Navajo culture is also illustrated in the explanation of Chee waiting for Highhawk to arrive. Chee doesn't mind waiting. In many ways, his attitude towards waiting symbolizes the difference between Navajo and Anglo-American culture. In Anglo-American culture, time is money and waiting is a waste of time. In traditional Navajo culture, time spent waiting is relaxing, calm, peaceful time off. It is time spent just existing and enjoying the scenery, not time wasted fretting and worrying about chores that are left undone. Still, not every Indian feels that way. Deputy Sheriff Cowboy Dashee does not enjoy waiting, perhaps because he is Hopi or perhaps simply due to his personality.

Navajo culture is expressed again in the Indian names given to various characters. While names are permanent in Anglo-American culture, Indian names are more like nicknames or inside jokes. They are just convenient ways to identify a person in a society with a limited population. Agnes Tsosie is called Old Woman Tsosie. Henry Highhawk is called Flaky Man. The gloved man that Chee observes is called the Man with Bad Hands, shortened to Bad Hands. This reveals the fact that Indian names are changeable and descriptive. The humorous side of Native American naming tradition is illustrated by Cowboy Dashee's name. He is an Indian named Cowboy, who works as a sheriff for Apache County.

The arrest warrant for Henry Highhawk raises the issue of museum ethics. Pot hunters have been digging up Native American graves for decades to sell the valuable artifacts. The practice is illegal, but widely practiced all over the American Southwest. The FBI seldom enforces the law, while the Pre-Columbian artifacts bring high prices in auctions. The inescapable conclusion is that Native Americans are as entitled to protection under the law as any other American. The author makes this point by using irony. When



Captain Largo explains that the FBI is concerned because the skeletons are white, the reader cannot help but think that this is racism. Irony is evident again when Chee wonders what Highhawk has done to be arrested. He hates being kept in the dark. In this passage, the reader knows far more about events than the main character does.

Chee's lost loves are Janet Pete and Mary Landon. Neither Cowboy Dashee nor the reader believe Chee's protests that Navajo attorney Janet Pete was just a friend, or that he is happy to be merely her confidant now. Yet, Chee's lack of jealousy and animosity about her new relationship show that he is a kind, understanding person. Chee seems more conflicted about his relationship with the white teacher Mary Langdon. Although she has left the reservation and returned to her native Wisconsin, Chee insists the relationship continues by letter.

Chapter Four is heavy in foreshadowing. Chee's mention of visiting Mary Langdon foreshadows trouble in that partnership. Bad Hand's damaged fingers and ominous black gloves foreshadow violence. When Highhawk records the ritual songs in violation of the rules, it foreshadows his willingness to disregard the rules for what he sees as a good cause.



# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

In chapter five, small-time criminal Leroy Fleck reflects on his personal problems. His beloved elderly mother is being kicked out of her nursing home for acts of violence against other residents. There is no way that he can care for her in his apartment and do his job. If Fleck does not get his mother into another nursing home soon, the director, who Fleck calls the Fat Man, will abandon her on the street. Fleck goes to a pay phone and calls a man he knows only as The Client. He reports on the six men he is following and demands \$10,000 that The Client owes him. Fleck desperately needs the money to move Mama into another nursing home.

The Client has already paid Fleck \$2,000 and refuses to pay him more until the month is up. Fleck has murdered a man, but The Client refuses to pay unless the corpse is unidentified and the murder unpublicized until the end of the month. Fleck doesn't know The Client's name but is almost sure that he is Hispanic and from an embassy.

In chapter six, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn is frustrated that no one seems concerned about the identity of the dead man in the pointy shoes. Leaphorn wonders about the man's lack of teeth. A few of the teeth seem to have been yanked out so violently that they caused bone lesions. Leaphorn puzzles over why the man would die without his dentures in.

Leaphorn wishes his wife Emma were still alive share her insights, but Emma has been dead for a year. When Leaphorn catches himself talking aloud in the lonely room, he flees into the light December snow. Having lunch with FBI Agent Kennedy, Leaphorn learns that the body has not yet been identified.

Leaphorn drives to the murder scene in the growing dusk and walks the crime scene again. As Leaphorn stands in the dark, an Amtrak passenger train speeds by without stopping. Returning to Gallup, Leaphorn phones a friend who works for the railroads. The friend verifies that an Amtrak train can be stopped in an emergency, if a passenger pulls the big hole lever. His friend will check to see if there was an emergency stop the night of the murder and let Leaphorn know.

## Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

Chapter five introduces the villain Leroy Fleck and explores his character. Fleck's concern for his mother is sometimes touching, sometimes chilling. Each time the Fat Man tells Fleck that his mother has punched, pushed or tripped another resident, Fleck automatically denies it with touching loyalty, although he knows very well that Mama is getting even. In her personal philosophy, even the smallest slight must be met with violence. Otherwise, in her opinion, They - the dreaded ruling class - will turn you into a bum. Fleck has unconsciously adopted his mother's philosophy. When Fleck meets with



the Fat Man, the director of the nursing home, he threatens the man with violence in a calm, chilling voice. As a result, the Fat Man agrees that Mama can stay a little longer.

Irony is used because the reader knows that the man Fleck has murdered is the unidentified corpse by the railroad tracks in Arizona, whose death Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn is investigating. Irony is also used when the reader makes the connection between the Chilean mask in the first chapter and Leroy Fleck's Hispanic client from an embassy.

The contrast between Anglo-American culture and Navajo tradition is apparent in the use of names. Both cultures use nicknames such as the Fat Man or the Captain. They are generally insulting rather than affectionate. Fleck uses the alias Stone in an ineffective attempt to conceal his true identity from The Client - whose name is unknown to him. Whereas Native American names identify, nicknames in Anglo-American culture are often disguises or insults.

In chapter six, Emma is shown to be Leaphorn's lost love, his wife who has passed away. He feels her absence so acutely that he talks to her and tries to conjure up her replies. In addition to missing her presence, Leaphorn always counted on her insights into his cases, to help him solve crimes. The longing for his dead wife is so severe that he wishes she were around to make him give up caffeine, even if it meant forgoing his much-loved coffee. One reason Leaphorn becomes so enmeshed in the case is because it distracts him from his grief for Emma



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter seven opens on Monday with Chee at his office. He is caught up with his work and is scheduled to take a two-week vacation beginning Tuesday to visit his girlfriend Mary Langdon in Wisconsin. Chee's mail includes a letter from his girlfriend. In the letter, Mary says she wants to end their relationship. She does not want their children to grow up on the reservation and cannot face the prospect of living there for her entire life. Chee would never be happy living in Wisconsin, so far away from his own people. He cannot face the fact that his children would not know their own culture. Although Chee knows that Mary is right, he is heartbroken and wonders what to do with his vacation time now.

Just then, attorney Janet Pete calls. Chee's friend Janet Pete has volunteered to defend Henry Highhawk against charges of desecration of graves. She reports that Highhawk and Gomez are plotting a crime much more serious than grave robbing. Janet tells Chee that a mysterious person has been following her, hanging around outside her home and office. He tells her that he was planning to take a vacation anyway and that he will come to Washington, DC.

In chapter eight, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn feels that harmony has been restored. He imagines that the murdered man was robbed and killed while a passenger on the Amtrak train. The murderer then pulled the emergency stop switch, dumped the body in the desert, and returned to the train. Bernard St. Germain, his contact from the railroad, calls. St. Germain reveals that the train was stopped for thirty-eight minutes due to a mechanical malfunction in the engine. St. Germain also tells Leaphorn how to trace the dead man's missing luggage.

Leaphorn has been reluctantly mulling over a destination for his annual vacation. Agent Kennedy reports that the FBI identified the dead man from his fingerprints as Hilario Madrid-Pena. Kennedy also reports that the FBI found the man's unclaimed luggage, and there was nothing significant in it. Leaphorn decides to use his vacation time to go to Washington, DC. and search the luggage himself.

## Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

Mary Langdon becomes Chee's lost love when she breaks up with him by letter. This is a cowardly way to deliver the news, and her timing the day before their big vacation is terrible. However, Mary is right about their differences. Chee and Mary are from two different worlds. She will never be truly happy with the limited opportunities on the reservation. She wants her children to grow up in the country's predominant Anglo-American culture, rather than Navajo culture. Yet she is perceptive enough to realize that Chee will never be truly happy away from his people and the reservation.



Chee loves Mary, but cannot stand the fact that his children would grow up knowing little about their own Navajo culture. Both of them know that this problem has no happy solution and they are better off ending the relationship, but they are still heartbroken.

Like Joe Leaphorn, Chee handles emotional pain by burying himself in work. Chee hopes that if he gets a job with the FBI, he and Mary will still have a future. He changes his vacation plans to go to Washington, DC instead of Wisconsin with that hope - and to help his friend Janet Pete.

Chapter eight reveals that although Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn has adopted many aspects of Anglo-American culture, he still retains the Navajo need for harmony. Leaphorn is disturbed by the apparent disharmony of the murder, which seems to violate the laws of cause and effect. Once he has created an explanation for how the body got in the middle of the desert, harmony is restored. However, Leaphorn's theory is mostly incorrect.

Leaphorn's reluctance to take a vacation touches on the theme of Lost Love. He has already postponed one vacation after his wife Emma's death. After a long marriage, traveling alone holds no appeal for Leaphorn. Still, he knows that taking time off will make him more productive in the long run. He dreads his friend's signs of pity if he does not take the time off. This case offers the perfect solution. Leaphorn can take two weeks of vacation in Washington, DC to investigate the case. Again, Leaphorn has used work as a distraction from grief over his wife.

The author uses dramatic irony in Agent Kennedy's protests that there are no clues in the abandoned luggage. The list given includes ceramic pottery and a small notebook, which are both potential clues. Even more important, the dead man's dentures are nowhere to be found. While the FBI agent believes these are not significant, the reader agrees with Joe Leaphorn that further investigation is needed. Irony and foreshadowing are used again when the reader realizes from Janet Pete's description that the man following her is the violent criminal Leroy Fleck.



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

In chapter nine, lawyer Janet Pete picks her friend Office Chee up at the airport in Washington, DC, where every male over the age of puberty seems to be wearing a business suit. Janet is fashionably dressed in a gray silk suit that shows off her trim figure. She tells Chee that she has seen the same man repeatedly. He seems to be following her in a dented Chevy.

In his shabby hotel room, Janet Pete tells Chee about her job with the law firm of Dalman, MacArthur, White and Herzog. She works for her lover and former law school professor, millionaire John McDermott. While McDermott is the firm's expert on the Southwest, Janet Pete is their token Indian.

One of McDermott's clients is a real estate development corporation, which has a financial interest in building a highway bypass on Tano Pueblo land. Older members of the tribal council oppose selling the land. A younger Tano man named Eldon Tamana favors the sale and plans to run for the tribal council. Tamana wants the Smithsonian to return the Tano fetish of a Twin War God to the tribe. Tamana believes that if he can recover the fetish without going through the usual lengthy legal process, this will ensure his election and the sale of the land for McDermott's client. As conservator at the Smithsonian, Henry Highhawk is in a position to steal the fetish from the museum. Janet believes that this is why her lover and the law firm encouraged her to volunteer to represent Highhawk.

In chapter ten, Leaphorn goes to the Amtrak office to search the luggage of Hilario Madrid- Perez for clues. He finds several. There is a small notebook with cryptic notes about a meeting in room 832 at the Harrington hotel, the word "AURANOFIN" and a number. There is also a list of items to check, including dentures, pockets, letters and eyeglasses. Finally, there is the name Henry Highhawk, which seems vaguely familiar to Leaphorn. Even more interesting, Amtrak employee Roland Dockery tells Leaphorn that he is friends with the conductor on the train. After the unexpected stop, the conductor checked on the passenger. A strange man was in the roomette.

## Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Officer Chee feels out of place in Washington, DC. He is dressed in his good jeans, a bolo tie and a black leather jacket, which are almost a uniform for men in the American Southwest. However, in DC, every man he sees on the street is wearing a business suit. All of the suits look identical to Chee.

Janet Pete's boss and lover John McDermott symbolizes Anglo-American culture. He is wealthy and flaunts that wealth. McDermott is educated and values his sense of superiority over other people. He uses his wealth and power to manipulate others,



especially Native Americans. For example, he is using Janet Pete to get the Tano Pueblo fetish so that his client can amass more money building apartments and condominiums near a highway bypass on what was formerly Indian land.

Janet Pete is torn between John McDermott and her unspoken but strong attraction to Officer Chee. This symbolizes the dilemma that every Navajo faces. It is a choice between abandoning their culture to seek success and wealth away from the reservation, or remaining true to their culture with fewer opportunities. Janet Pete waffles between the two. When Chee met her, she was working for Tribal Legal Aid on the reservation, helping her own people. Now, she is pursuing wealth and reputation as an attorney in DC. However, the law firm is using her as a token Indian rather than treating her with the respect she deserves. The law partners fail to recognize that the differences between Navajo culture and Cherokee or Apache culture are as great as the differences between Navajo culture and their own.

In Navajo culture, it is important to blend in and be in harmony with friends and neighbors. Members of the tribe share their wealth with one another. They are expected to give money to those less fortunate than themselves, rather than use it to buy big houses, fancy cars or expensive, fashionable clothing. Therefore, anyone who displays the outward trappings of wealth is considered selfish and immature. In Anglo-American culture, it is more important to stand out in the crowd. Flashy cars and designer clothes are evidence that one is uniquely talented and successful, a person to be admired. In Anglo-American culture, many Navajos seem poor. To the Navajo, many urban Americans seem shallow and self-absorbed.

In chapter ten, the Amtrak employee did not tell the FBI agent about the conductor's story because the young agent did not seem interested. This irritates Lieutenant Leaphorn. As a Navajo, Leaphorn believes that every human being is equally valuable. However, he understands that to the FBI and in Anglo-American culture in general, wealthy, powerful, well-known people are more valuable than average people are. Leaphorn refuses to accept the theory that this murder should not be completely investigated simply because the victim was not rich and influential. When Henry Highhawk's name is discovered in the murdered man's luggage, it suggests he is the killer.





# Chapters 11 and 12

## Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

In chapter eleven, Chee and Janet Pete take the Metro, the Washington subway, to Henry Hightower's townhouse. Hightower invites Chee to admire the kachina collection in his office while the man confers privately with his attorney, Janet Pete. They discuss a generous plea bargain offered by the prosecutor that would allow Highhawk to avoid any jail time on the charges of desecrating graves. Highhawk refuses, determined to be seen as a militant Indian, despite his white heritage.

In the office, Chee is surprised to find a traditional Yeibichai mask, perfect in every detail. Chee can tell it is a replica only because there are no smears of corn pollen on the mouth where the owner has fed it. The office also contains Hopi and Zuni artifacts. Either Highhawk has stolen them from the Smithsonian, or they are very clever fakes. Chee also finds a set of beautiful but surreal drawings depicting the Navajo myth of Holy Boy.

Rudolfo Gomez, the man known as Bad Hands, arrives, and Highhawk refers to him as an old friend, twice in a very short time. Leaving, Chee and Janet Pete pass by the car that has been following her. After a moment of hesitation, Chee confronts the driver. The small, slight red-haired man denies that he has been following Janet Pete.

In chapter twelve, Leroy Fleck locates the phone booth with the number where he is supposed to call the client today. Fleck rents a car with a cell phone in it, and takes his camera along so that he can photograph The Client. He will also follow the man when he leaves the phone booth to find out where he works.

Fleck is still looking for a new rest home for his mother. The director insists she move out of her current one and has only agreed to let her stay a few days longer because he is afraid of Fleck. Fleck desperately needs at least \$3,000 to move her into a new home. Waiting for his client to appear, Fleck remembers the lessons about revenge that he learned from his mother. Once she and his brother Delmar set fire to a house they had recently been evicted from. At Mama's insistence, twelve-year-old Leroy confessed to the crime, saving sixteen-year-old Delmar from a prison sentence. Mama's lessons served Fleck well when he was in Joliet State Penitentiary as a young man. There, he killed three inmates named Cassidy, Dakin and Neal, who had raped him. He used a technique similar to the one used to kill Madrid-Penas, the Amtrak passenger.

While Fleck waits, a man in a suit circles the block and finally steps into the phone booth. At the appointed time, Fleck calls the number The Client has given him. The phone in the booth rings and the man answers, confirming that he is the client. Fleck gives him a progress report, including the fact that an Indian police officer has confronted him. The Client is angry and calls Fleck an amateur.



The client and Fleck have a cryptic conversation about letting Santerno slip away and killing Old Man Santillanes. Again, Fleck demands the \$10,000 owed to him and again the client says he must wait the full month. When the client hangs up, Fleck is so angry that he is shaking as he raises the camera to snap photos of the client. The client has no idea he is being observed as Fleck trails him back to the embassy.

## Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

In Chapter Eleven, Officer Chee is disturbed by the way people on the subway politely ignore each other, avoiding all human contact. This is in contrast to behavior in the western US. Chee realizes that due to fear of widespread crime and violence, these urban dwellers are afraid to make contact with strangers.

Jim Chee's exploration of Highhawk's office reveals that the museum conservator is skilled in creating forgeries and in making them appear ancient. The violence of a unbalanced mind is foreshadowed in the surreal quality of the Holy Boy drawings. Once again, Rudolfo Gomez's damaged hands foreshadow death, because they seem to have been destroyed by a bomb or other violent event.

More violence is foreshadowed in the meeting between Chee, Janet Pete and Leroy Fleck. Using irony, the author allows the reader to know that Leroy Fleck is a murderer who believes in getting even for every tiny slight. Chee and especially Janet Pete are now in danger.

Leroy Fleck's complex character is revealed in Chapter Twelve. Fleck remembers the murder on the train, so the reader is sure of his guilt. Yet, this violent man's overwhelming concern is caring for his aged mother. Fleck's affectionate memories of Mama show that he can be a generous, compassionate person. As a child, Fleck sacrificed his freedom to save his brother from years in jail. This trait contrasts with the extreme violence he shows in killing Old Man Santillanes, who is apparently the man on the train also known as Hilario Madrid-Penas.



# Chapters 13 and 14

## Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

In chapter thirteen, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Amtrak employee Roland Dockery arrive at Union Station to meet with the train conductor. Leaphorn points out that the handwriting on the list found in the luggage is different from the small, cramped handwriting found in the notebook. Leaphorn realizes that the paper is a list of items the killer wanted to get rid of because they could help identify the victim. He puzzles over the word AURANOFIN and the code number beginning with a W. Even worse, Emma will not be there to reassure him that he is not a failure.

The Amtrak conductor finally arrives and repeats his story of the strange man in the roomette. The conductor describes the man as short, muscular but slender with short curly red hair, freckles and a reddish face. The conductor is haunted by the realization that he was talking to a killer. Even worse, as they were speaking, the red-haired man was probably considering killing the conductor, too.

In the taxi to the hotel, Leaphorn is dejected until he has an inspiration. Checking with a pharmacy, he learns that auranofin is a drug. A pharmacist looks up the prescription number, and gives Leaphorn the victim's name and address. With the crime victim identified, Leaphorn takes the taxi to the address. The couple there denies knowing the victim Elogio Santillanes, but Leaphorn is sure they are lying. Walking away, he sees a man inside apartment three who exactly matches the description of the killer in the roomette on the train.

In chapter fourteen, Chee says how much he would like to see the Tano Twin War God fetish. He and Highhawk arrange to meet at the Twelfth Street museum entrance. Leaving the hotel, Chee notices the Chevy with the bent antenna and dented fender nearby.

Chee gets a shock just outside the museum entrance when he sees a mentally ill homeless man sleeping within sight of the Washington monument. Plenty of people pass out drunk on the reservation, but others try to help them. Here in the nation's capitol, people simply ignore the man.

Highhawk leads Chee into the Natural History Museum and behind a screen, into a private area where he is setting up a new exhibit: The Masked Gods of the Americas. He shows Chee a display with a manikin dressed in the Yeibichai mask. The mask appears to be genuine, and ancient. Chee wonders how the museum came to possess such a sacred object, traditionally handed down from father to son.

Highhawk introduces Chee to his supervisor, Dr. Caroline Hartman. She proudly shows him her portion of the exhibit, a jewel-encrusted golden Inca mask of the god Viracocha. Chee asks how the museum obtained the valuable mask. He cannot imagine anyone



giving it up, just as he cannot imagine a Navajo giving up the Yeibichai mask. Hartman tells him that the jeweled mask belonged to a political family in Chile, who gave it to an executive of a major American corporation operating there. The executive's heirs needed a tax write-off, so they donated the valuable mask to the museum. Now, the Chilean embassy has requested it back. Hartman fears that if it is returned, the priceless mask will fall into the hands of General Ramon Huerta Cardona, head of the secret police. It might even be melted down, or sold to a private collector.

Highhawk reluctantly takes Chee into the workshop to show him the Tano War God figurine. Chee cannot tell if this is the same carving that he saw in Highhawk's home office, or a very similar one. The miles of back corridors in the museum are lined with high stacks of locked wooden storage boxes.

When the two men return to Highhawk's office, he gets a mysterious phone call. The conservator tells Chee he has something that he wants to do and will be back in ten or fifteen minutes. Chee instinctively checks his watch. It is 9:25 p.m. While waiting in Highhawk's office, Chee hears a clatter in the museum corridor, perhaps mixed with a shout. Then, silence with perhaps the sound of an elevator descending, and rapid steps. He rushes into the corridor, and searches for Highhawk, but sees no one. When Highhawk does not return after half an hour, Chee leaves, using the Twelfth Street exit. He wants to ask the security guard if Henry Highhawk has left the building, but she is not at her desk.

## Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

As a child, Lieutenant Leaphorn followed the tribe's predominant religion, called the Navajo Way. As an adult, however, he believes in a universal harmony in the cause and effect set in motion when God created the Cosmos. In his work as a detective, Leaphorn attempts to understand the causes and effects at work, and restore harmony and balance to the natural world, including the world of men.

Like Dockery, Leaphorn is not terribly religious. The conversation between the two men is awkward because Dockery insists on seeing Leaphorn as a stereotype, rather than a unique individual. Dockery makes the mistake of assuming that all Indians are the same, while all Anglo people are individuals. Thus, although Dockery is fascinated with Indian culture, he is being racist. Dockery symbolizes all Anglos who commit unconscious racism against Indians through stereotyping.

The exchange with Dockery illustrates the fact that different Indian tribes such as Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, Apache, Cherokee and Taos Indian have very different cultural traditions and religious beliefs. Dockery lumps them all together as Indian, when in fact each is as different from the others as it is from Anglo-American culture. He also fails to recognize that just as some Anglos are Catholic while others are atheist, there is variation in beliefs within the same Indian tribe.



Jim Chee is attracted to Janet Pete and invites her out to dinner so they can hold hands. He is jealous and hates to think of her having sex with John McDermott. However, he realizes that she sees him as only a friend, not a potential lover. At this point in their lives, they are as much a world apart as Chee and Mary Langdon. Janet Chee is a young, successful, fashionable lawyer in the nation's capitol while Chee is a low-ranking police officer in a very small Southwestern town. Yes, their Navajo heritage and culture unites them, a connection Chee will never have with Langdon.

Chee is alarmed to find a homeless man sleeping under bushes within sight of the Washington Monument. This incident illustrates another essential feature of Navajo culture, the obligation to help others. Chee is concerned and tries to help the man. The homeless man is terrified, thinking Chee is trying to attack him. Chee is truly appalled to realize that urban dwellers are so out of touch with each other that they will walk by without even trying to help this man. In Navajo culture, the man's clan would feel obligated to care for him.

Dr. Hartman's saga of how the mask was obtained illustrates the ethical issues that museums face. The very valuable mask belongs to the clan as a whole, not to an individual person. It seems suspicious that the owner would give the mask to a business executive. In many cases, the museum seems only too willing to accept artifacts that are essentially stolen.



# Chapters 15 and 16

## Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

In chapter fifteen, Joe Leaphorn phones his friend FBI Agent Kennedy and fills him in. Two FBI men rap on the hotel door and interrogate Leaphorn. They are condescending and resent his intrusion into the case involving a terrorist organization. Leaphorn bluffs by telling them that he will be discussing progress in the murder investigation with a prominent New Mexico senator. He skillfully questions the FBI agents, arousing their interest in the red-haired man in apartment two. Leaphorn asks the FBI agents about Henry Highhawk, but the two men have no explanation for his name in Santillanes' notebook. With a quick phone call to his office, Leaphorn learns about the arrest warrant for Highhawk. The arresting officer was his friend, Office Chee. Leaphorn calls Chee's office, only to be told the Navajo policeman is on vacation in Washington, DC, and the name of the hotel where he is staying. Leaphorn assumes that Chee's case is related to his own, because he does not believe in coincidence.

In chapter sixteen, Leroy Fleck has a lot on his mind. The situation with Mama is desperate. He has had to hurt the nursing home director he calls the Fat Man. Even worse, he threatened to kill the man if he called the police. Fleck considers asking his contact Eddy Elkins for the money. Elkins is his liaison with The Client. Fleck met disbarred attorney Eddy Elkins in prison. It was Elkins who assured him that he needed to get revenge against the men who raped him and who showed him how to kill silently with a knife. Now Elkins handles investigations for a Chicago law firm with ties to organized crime. Meanwhile, Fleck amuses himself with the classified ads. Fleck calls strangers who have items to sell and has long, friendly phone conversations with them. He finds this much more relaxing than going to bars, where the people you talk to are not normal.

While he waits for the client to call, Fleck reads a newspaper story on page two about General Ramon Huerta Cardona's upcoming visit to the Smithsonian to request the return of the golden mask. On page four, there is a small article about the body found in New Mexico beside the railroad tracks. It has been identified as Elogio Santillanes y Jimenez, an exiled communist leader from Chile. The FBI takes all credit for the identification. Fleck's heart sinks. It has only been twenty-nine days since the murder, and The Client promised to pay only if the man's identity was unknown for thirty days.

The client calls, berating Fleck for the discovery, calling him the son of a whore in Spanish and refusing to pay him. Fleck threatens to reveal the Chilean Embassy's part in the murder, but The Client hangs up on him. Desperate, Fleck ponders getting even. First, however, he must get \$3,000 somehow. All he can think of is mugging a lot of wealthy people.



## Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

Chapter fifteen illustrates Lieutenant Leaphorn's ability to move seamlessly between the Navajo and Anglo-American cultures. The lieutenant is able to understand the buzzwords of the Washington FBI Agents and pump them for information, treating them as fellow law enforcement officers while showing the deference they expect. When the FBI agents refuse to give him more information, he identifies exactly what will motivate the men to cooperate. Leaphorn implies that he knows an influential senator. Leaphorn's friendships with white FBI Agent Kennedy and Officer Chee of the Navajo Police symbolize his ability to bridge both worlds. This talent makes him a great detective in the American Southwest.

Yet, Leaphorn is also Navajo at heart. In his mind, the murder of anyone disrupts the harmony and balance of the natural world. Leaphorn wants to restore harmony by tracking down the killer. While the FBI agents are interested only in people who are influential or wealthy, in Leaphorn's Navajo worldview every human is equally valuable.

The author uses irony again when Leaphorn wonders how Highhawk can be related to the Chilean embassy and the murder, facts that the reader knows from Chee's investigation. The car bombing foreshadows explosive events to come, and makes the reader wonder if Gomez' damaged hands are linked to bomb making. Irony is apparent again in chapter sixteen when Leroy Fleck muses that the people one meets in bars are not normal. The reader is fully aware that Fleck is far from normal.





# Chapters 17 and 18

## Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

In chapter seventeen, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Officer Chee meet for breakfast in the restaurant at Chee's shabby hotel. Leaphorn is dressed in the eastern establishment uniform of a business suit, although it is a cheap suit from Sears, too big and years out of date. Still, Chee cannot get used to the sight. He has seldom seen the legendary Leaphorn in anything except the uniform of the Navajo Tribal Police. Chee tells his mentor about Henry Highhawk and Gomez. Leaphorn fills Chee in on his murder case. Leaphorn wants to question Henry Highhawk. Chee explains about the man's mysterious disappearance at the Natural History Museum the night before.

The two sleuths go to Henry Highhawk's townhouse, but find it deserted. Leaphorn calls his friend Captain P.J. Rodney with the District of Columbia Police, who meets them at a coffee shop. Rodney immediately questions Officer Chee on his activities the night before. The captain is especially interested that the security guard was not at her station when Chee left about 10:30 p.m.

The female security guard Alice Yoakum was killed sometime before midnight last night. Her body was discovered this morning under the bushes near the museum entrance. Leaphorn asks eagerly if she was stabbed, but she was killed with a blow to the head.

The three policemen go to the museum to search for Highhawk. They find the conservator's office unlocked, with the light on, just as Chee left it last night. Dr. Hartman, Highhawk's boss, is also looking for him. Chee speculates that the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History is the best place in the world to hide a body, with thousands of containers lining the corridors. Highhawk's master key for the containers is missing from its hook in his office.

Before the men set out to search the vast holding of the Smithsonian, Officer Chee suggests that Captain Rodney check with maintenance and security to see if they reported anything suspicious. Rodney wonders why. Lieutenant Leaphorn explains that if Highhawk's body was stuffed into a container, the contents of the container would have to be disposed of somehow. Security reports nothing unusual, but a maintenance worker has found a bamboo fish trap as big as a body sitting in a passageway.

In chapter eighteen, Leroy Fleck calls his brother Delmar to plead for help paying Mama's expenses. Delmar refuses to have anything to do with Leroy. He hasn't visited their mother in years. Delmar tells Leroy to let the government take care of Mama, but Leroy insists there is no agency that does so. Leroy has only \$2,033. He decides to give every cent to the Fat Man and beg him to let Mama stay at the nursing home a little longer.





The Fat Man is not in his office when Leroy arrives at the nursing home. Mama is tied to her wheelchair in a room that smells of urine. Leroy brings her favorite candy, red licorice, and speaks gently to her even though she does not recognize him. Ironically, Delmar is Mama's favorite son. She believes that he is being held hostage by Arabs, so he cannot visit her. Mama complains to her visitor about her weak-willed younger son Leroy, whom she calls a jailbird and a fairy.

A policeman arrives, summoned by the nursing home receptionist. The cop politely questions Leroy about threatening to kill the Fat Man. Acting the part of a respectable son, Leroy apologizes and admits using harsh words to the nursing home director for the poor treatment of his mother. He points out that the elderly woman is tied to her chair, her room smells like urine and she has bedsores. The clean-cut young cop visibly relaxes. He will forget the whole incident if Leroy submits to a search. The Fat Man is four times Leroy's size. The policeman cannot imagine anyone as small as Leroy attacking a big man without a weapon. Leroy agrees to the search because his knife is securely hidden in his boot.

As the police officer starts searching him, his mother scornfully tells Leroy to get down on his knees and lick the policeman's shoes. Just as it seems Leroy will escape, he decides to kill the policeman. Leroy slips his knife out of his boot and silently stabs the man in the heart, killing him quickly and cleanly. He dispassionately cleans blood from his knife, wiping it on the cop's uniform shirt.

## Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

Chapter seventeen explores the character of the two Navajo detectives, united at last in the nation's capitol. Lieutenant Leaphorn's ability to bridge both the Anglo-American and Native American cultures is evident in his choice of dress. Like the majority of adult men in the eastern establishment, Leaphorn dresses in a business suit for his meeting with Jim Chee. Yet, the style of the suit betrays the fact that try as he might, Leaphorn will never completely make the transition to Anglo-American culture. The cheap polyester suit purchased off the rack from Sears contrasts with the expensive hand-tailored suits of the men around him. The suit symbolizes Leaphorn's ability to bridge both worlds without truly being a part of either.

Still, Officer Jim Chee is shocked to see Leaphorn in a business suit. He thinks of the legendary detective only in his Navajo Tribal Police uniform. It just seems wrong, like a billy goat wearing socks. This reaction says more about Chee than about Leaphorn. A true child of the reservation, Chee cannot fathom a person who alters their appearance or personality to fit the situation, even when that is appropriate. Chee dresses and acts exactly the same, regardless of where he is. While this philosophy may be admirable, it also makes him less than effective when dealing with non-Navajos. Despite their differences, the two detectives understand one another well enough to read each other's minds.



The effects of a lost love are evident in the details of Leaphorn's suit. It was purchased decades ago. Even worse, it is too big for him now that he has lost weight. Although Leaphorn attributes the weight loss to eating his own cooking, it is a common symptom of grief.

Chapter eighteen illuminates Leroy Fleck's extremely complex character, formed mostly by his mother. Mama believes in getting even for the smallest infraction, even an unintentional one. She sees the world, especially the upper class, as being out to get her. Mama's only power is derived from getting even. She pursues revenge, even when it is not in her best interest to do so, as when she attacks other residents of the nursing home. Mama never really liked Leroy. In her mind, Delmar is smarter, stronger and a better person. She accuses Leroy of being weak and a homosexual. Rather than resent Mama's assessment of his character, Leroy has spent his entire life trying harder and harder to earn her approval.

Fleck is irrational at times. He takes offense at the smallest slight, such as someone accidentally jostling him in a crowded place or the police officer asking to search him. Fleck reacts violently to what he sees as signs of disrespect. Yet, he unquestioningly accepts his brother's rejection. Showing amazing disloyalty, Delmar Fleck scorns his brother, despite the sacrifices that Leroy has made for him. Even though Fleck confessed to a crime and went into juvenile detention to protect Delmar, he receives no thanks now.

Although Fleck does not expect loyalty from his brother, he is amazingly loyal to his mother. Perhaps in an attempt to win her approval, Fleck financially supports his mother, visits her regularly, and brings her favorite red licorice candy. Most important, he listens without resentment while Mama raves about Delmar, her favorite son, and says untrue, hurtful things about her weak younger son Leroy.



# Chapters 19 and 20

## Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

Chee, Leaphorn and Captain Rodney summon Dr. Hartman to help locate the fish trap's container in chapter nineteen. Checking the computer, she informs them that the museum has dozens of bamboo fish traps in storage. She identifies the three that best match the description. With a tired museum security guard, the four begin checking containers. The first bin contains a fish trap made by a Palawan Island tribe. They move two aisles away to the next bin, repository for artifacts from Borneo.

Rodney unlocks the bin, and all they can see is a human head. It is Highhawk, and he has been killed by a gunshot to the head. Beneath the body is the Yeibichai mask. The rest of the bin is filled with fishing spears, canoe paddles and nets. The crime scene techs and homicide sergeant are still at the museum, working on the murder of security guard Alice Yoakum. When they arrive, Highhawk's pockets are searched, revealing a small cassette recorder wired to a watch.

Captain Rodney plays the recording. It contains a portion of a song from the Night Chant. Highhawk's voice talks about the purpose of the Night Chant. It is not to cure Agnes Tsosie from liver cancer, which would be impossible. Instead, it is to help her restore her to harmony with her fate. Highhawk's recorded voice delivers a diatribe about how the museum displays holy artifacts of conquered peoples like endangered animals in a zoo. He compares displaying the Yeibichai mask or the Tano War God fetish to putting consecrated host from a Roman Catholic Church on display. Highhawk argues that the museum could not possibly need 18,000 ancestral skeletons for scientific studies.

The men shut off the recorder. Officer Chee points out that the Indian skeletons were collected by an earlier generation of anthropologists and that some have been returned to tribes like the Blackfoot. However, the Smithsonian will only return them if a family connection can be proved. Mostly, Chee says, Navajos avoid old bones, so they are not into what he calls "this corpse fetish business." Lieutenant Leaphorn disagrees, informing Chee that the Navajo Tribal Council has requested that the Smithsonian return all skeletons of their ancestors.

The two detectives compare notes. Leaphorn's dead man with the pointy shoes went to great trouble to follow Henry Highhawk to New Mexico. When he was killed, his co-conspirator Gomez tracked Highhawk down. Leaphorn wonders aloud how Highhawk is related to the communist leaders from Chile, who have been tortured.

Office Chee has a different question. He remembers Highhawk's rapt face at Night Chant. As a shaman, Chee knows that some people come to the ceremony simply to watch the dancing. Others, like Joe Leaphorn, come out of family obligation. Still others come because they truly believe in the Navajo gods. It is their religion. Highhawk was a



believer, Chee is sure. Chee cannot imagine Highhawk agreeing to desecrate the Yeibichai mask by putting it on display. He would have created a replica. Chee examines the mask found with Highhawk's body. Despite its ancient appearance, it has no corn pollen stains on the mouthpiece, meaning it must be the fake. He reasons that whoever killed Highhawk must have put the genuine mask on the display, not the replica that Chee saw there yesterday.

Leaphorn asks what the display looks like. Chee replies that the Yeibichai mask is right across from a jeweled golden Inca Mask from Chile. In fact, a Chilean general who is trying to get the mask back is scheduled to visit today to see the mask. Suddenly both Navajo policemen jump up and run out the door.

Meanwhile, in chapter twenty, Leroy Fleck calmly walks out of the nursing home after killing the policeman. He gets in his car and drives carefully, following all the traffic laws. If the police link his car to the murder, it will be easy for them to find him. They already have a description of him, but not his real name. Fleck is downtown before he hears the call about an officer down on the police scanner he keeps in the car.

Leroy stops by Western Union. He sends a message for his brother Delmar to take care of Mama. Leroy encloses a money order for \$2,030, keeping only three dollars for himself. He drives to the Chilean embassy and uses the pay phone nearby. Fleck uses the code The Client has given him for emergencies, asking the receptionist for Stone. Finally a man tells him Stone cannot come to the phone, they are about to leave. Leroy decides that he can wait.

Soon the embassy gates open and two black cars emerge. Fleck follows them to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. He parks in a No Parking zone and watches seven men get out of the two black cars. Fleck identifies one as The Client, the head of security at the Chilean embassy. Two others are the visiting general and the ambassador. The general has a bodyguard. The rest are photographers to record this public event. Fleck leaves the keys in the car and the door unlocked.

Inside, the men from the Chilean Embassy join about sixty visitors at the Masks of the Americas exhibit. Fleck figures that he can kill one, maybe two of the men before being caught. The Client, a professional, must be first. Then he can go after the General. Fleck reaches into his boot to pull out his knife. He waits for the right moment.

## Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

The contrast between Lieutenant Leaphorn and Office Chee is evident in chapter nineteen. Leaphorn uses western-style logic to link Gomez' deformed hands and Santillanes' missing teeth. In keeping with Navajo culture, Chee relies on emotion, intuition and an ability to read body language to decide that Henry Highhawk truly believes the Navajo religion and would not intentionally blow up the authentic Yeibichai mask. Both arrive at correct conclusions using different methods.



The issue of ethics for museums moves to the forefront in chapter nineteen. The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History has millions of artifacts, yet seems unwilling to part with any of them. Museum staff argues that genuine skeletons and relics are important for their exhibits. Yet, they have some 18,000 Indian skeletons that are not even on display, but in permanent storage bins stacked to the ceiling in every corridor. Henry Highhawk's recording also raises valid points about the collection of artifacts, especially ancient artifacts of active cultures. Many Christians would find it sacrilegious for a museum to display consecrated communion wafers. Highhawk argues that for modern Navajos, displaying an authentic Yeibichai mask is exactly the same.

The origin of many museum artifacts is also a problem. The Tano War God fetish, for example, belongs to the entire tribe, not any one individual, much the same way an altar robe or communion chalice belongs to an entire church congregation, not one individual. Therefore, no one person had the authority to give the Tano War God fetish to an individual collector, or to the museum. The author subtly argues that museums frequently ignore the dubious sources of artifacts and art work, in their greed to own them. The Tano War God fetish and the Yeibichai mask symbolize all the Indian artifacts that have been misappropriated by museums.

Chapter twenty is heavy in foreshadowing. Before the author explicitly reveals Fleck's intentions, there are many clues that he is on a suicide mission to kill as many people as possible. These clues include the fact that he keeps only \$3 for himself, and leaves his car unlocked, with the keys in the ignition, parked in a No Parking zone. All of these are the acts of a man who never intends to return.



# Chapters 21 and 22

## Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

In chapter twenty-one, the elevator to the main floor is painfully slow. Office Chee thinks that he and Lieutenant Leaphorn should have taken the six flights of stairs - it would have been faster. On the way down, he confirms for Leaphorn that the man with the damaged hands who goes by the alias Gomez is really Miguel Santerno. Chee believes that Highhawk was talking to Santerno on the phone just before Highhawk disappeared. Leaphorn worries that nothing but conjecture connects Santerno, Highhawk, Santillanes and the red-haired man.

Chee guesses that Santerno has planted a bomb in the Masks of the Americas exhibit, in an attempt to kill the Chilean general. The best place for a bomb would be inside the Yeibichai mask. The elevator door finally opens on the first floor. They agree that the younger, faster Chee will go after the bomb while Leaphorn looks for Santerno or whoever has the detonator. The exhibit is full of television news crews and photographers.

Chee has two big fears. The first is that the bomb will detonate just as he arrives, killing him. The second is that he will pull off the Yeibichai mask to find that there is no bomb, making a complete fool of himself on TV. Chee rushes to the exhibit, jumps over the barrier and grabs the Yeibichai mask. It is connected to the manikin's head and will not come off. He jerks the head off the manikin. A museum security guard yells at him to get out of the exhibit and drop the mask.

The guard runs up. Chee shows him the head and tells him it is a bomb, while disconnecting the wires. There is a hubbub at the Incan display, but the guard tells everyone to evacuate the building. Chee hears shots fired while he climbs out of the display with a ball of grey putty-like explosive in one hand and the authentic Yeibichai mask in the other.

Meanwhile, Leroy Fleck is biding his time. He has decided that one of the photographers is an undercover bodyguard for the ambassador. That changes everything. Fleck must kill General Cordonas first. After all, he is the most important. Fleck conceals his knife inside an envelope. He notices that Santerno is also stalking the general, but ignores him. Just then, the two Indian policemen burst out of the elevator. The young one races for the mask, while the older one dashes towards Santerno. Fleck sees his chance, and moves like lightening towards the Incan display.

Fleck muscles his way past the bodyguards, claiming he has a letter from an admirer for General Cordonas. He stabs the man through the envelope. Fleck grabs the general as he falls and cries that the man has fainted. The general collapses on the floor, dead. The Client runs up. Fleck stabs him again and again in the side. The bodyguard pulls his gun and shoots Fleck in the head.



Leaphorn usually plans carefully, but he has not time to plan this. He must assume that Santerno will be acting alone. Leaphorn is not young and strong like Santerno, so he uses guile. He grips Santerno's right arm and tells him in Spanish that the general is an imposter, the attack is called off. A security guard is shouting at Chee to get out of the exhibit. Santerno jerks his arm away and demands that Leaphorn speak English. The policeman takes that opportunity to knock the remote detonator out of the man's hand. After all, Santerno only has two fingers with which to hold it. The remote goes skidding across the floor. Leaphorn kicks it further away and the crowd of spectators tramples it in their rush to get outside. Leaphorn leans against a wall to catch his breath and reflects that he is getting too old for this.

Chapter twenty-two opens with Chee in his hotel the next day. Chee hardly slept the night before, and he has a pounding headache. Lieutenant Leaphorn has courtesy left a message that he has returned to Window Rock. Chee feels flattered that the legendary detective would treat him like an equal, like two Navajo in the big city. Chee goes for a walk and sits in a posh hotel across from the White House watching what his sociology professor used to call "the privileged class."

When Chee returns to his hotel, Janet Pete calls. She has seen Chee's photo on the news and wants to make certain he is safe. Janet cannot understand how a kind person like Highhawk could be involved in a bomb plot. Chee tells her that Highhawk probably knew nothing about the bomb. He thought his recorded rant would be hidden in the mask. Chee gratefully accepts her offer to drive him to the airport.

Chee remembers handing ball of explosive to the security officer with instructions to give it to the police, who are just arriving. With the authentic Yeibichai mask in his hand, Chee takes the elevator upstairs to Highhawk's office. He puts the real Yeibichai mask inside a box and closes it. Then he picks up the nearly identical mask in his right hand and takes the elevator back downstairs, where he hands the fake mask over to the police. Outside, Chee walks around until he finds Henry Highhawk's car. He breaks into the trunk and removes the authentic Tano War God fetish. Carefully, Chee places it in the box with the mask.

Mary Langdon, Chee's ex-girlfriend, calls to apologize for breaking up with him by letter. She wants Chee to come to Wisconsin to visit her, after all. Chee asks if she feels any different about living on the reservation, and she says no. He says that he does not feel any different about living away from his people, so nothing has changed. Mary agrees, but says that it still breaks her heart.

Janet Pete arrives to take Chee to the airport. Chee gives her the Tano War God fetish, telling her that it should not be so far from home. He tells Janet she can do whatever she likes with the Tano War God. Janet invites Chee to stay in Washington, but he tells her that he will return home. He has been in Washington too long. Janet replies that she, too has been in Washington too long. She tells him that she will take the Tano War God home herself.





## Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

With an intuitive understanding of each other that shows their underlying connection, Lieutenant Leaphorn and Office Chee act as a team to prevent the bombing, saving dozens of lives. In true Navajo fashion, they neither expect nor receive any honors for these heroic acts. Taking the issue of museum ethics into his own hands, in the confusion Office Jim Chee takes the authentic Yeibichai mask and Tano War God fetish from the Smithsonian, leaving them exact copies created by Henry Highhawk. In effect, Chee steals back religious icons stolen from the tribes.

In chapter twenty-two, Officer Chee's girlfriend Mary Langdon calls to apologize, but Chee realizes that her decision to end the relationship was the right one. As much as it hurts, they are from two different worlds and cannot ever be happy together. Chee declines Mary's invitation to come to Wisconsin, although he agrees that she should not have broken up with him in a letter.

Chee generously gives the Tano War God fetish to Janet Pete. This gift means the attorney has a decision to make. She can give the fetish to Tamana, which will benefit a client of her law firm and please her boss and lover, John McDermott. Instead, Janet Pete chooses to return the sacred figurine to the Tano tribe herself. By acting in this way to restore harmony rather than use the fetish for personal gain, Janet Pete chooses the Navajo way over Anglo-American culture. This decision foreshadows a return to the reservation and a future romance with Officer Jim Chee.





# Characters

## Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn

One of the two main characters, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn is a recurring detective in Tony Hillerman's novels. Leaphorn is middle-aged, and his beloved wife Emma has recently died. Leaphorn is grief-stricken, has lost weight and often finds himself talking aloud to Emma in their home. He uses vacation time to investigate a crime in Washington, DC because he cannot face the prospect of going on vacation alone.

Leaphorn has moved away from the traditional Navajo culture of his childhood and is now more a pragmatic agnostic. While he believes in a God who created a world of causes and effects, he retains the Navajo love of order, harmony and balance. This need often drives him to probe more deeply into crimes than other police officers do. Leaphorn uses western logic to analyze and solve crimes, although he has some appreciation for the beliefs of more traditional Navajo, including his good friend Office Jim Chee.

Leaphorn's ability to bridge both the Anglo-American culture and the Navajo culture is crucial in this story. On the reservation, Leaphorn wears his Navajo Tribal Police uniform, but in Washington, DC, he wears a business suit. When talking with DC Police Captain P.J. Rodney and Officer Jim Chee, Leaphorn is able to bridge the cultural gap between the two to solve the crime and save the lives of many innocent people when he foils a terrorist attack.

## Officer Jim Chee

Officer Jim Chee is the very unusual combination of a young Navajo Tribal Police Officer who is also training to become a shaman, or medicine man. Chee follows the Navajo religion, called the Navajo Way, and other aspects of the traditional Navajo culture. This commitment to his people and his culture doom Chee's relationship with girlfriend Mary Langdon, a white teacher from Wisconsin. Mary realizes that the two are simply too different and can never be happy together, so she breaks up with Chee via letter early in the novel. By the last chapter, Chee also realizes that theirs is an impossible love. Chee is attracted to attorney Janet Pete, but she has also chosen Anglo-American culture over Navajo culture, at least for the time being.

Chee solves crimes by listening to his intuition and paying attention to the nuances of emotion, spirituality and body language. While this technique is effective, it is difficult to explain to those accustomed to western logic. He lives a simple life on the reservation in a small silver travel trailer parked under a cottonwood tree near a creek. The location is so remote that mail is not delivered to his home.

In Chee's eyes, the Yeibichai mask is as sacred as consecrated host is to a Roman Catholic. Chee believes that the spirit of the Talking god truly lives in the mask, and



cannot stand to see the sacred object displayed in a museum. When Chee has the opportunity, he removes both the Yeibichai mask and the Tano War God fetish from the museum, to return them to their tribes.

## Henry Highhawk

A conservator at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, Henry Highhawk is a study in contrasts. He is a white man who wants to be Navajo. He is a museum conservator who fights against his employer for the return of skeletal remains to Native American tribes.

The blue-eyed blond Highhawk is one-fourth Navajo and claims to be a member of the Bitter Water clan. He is interested in being accepted into the Navajo tribe, even though he knows almost nothing about the culture. He wears his long hair in two braids until learning that Navajo men usually wear their hair in a bun. Disregarding rules and tradition, he tapes a Navajo religious ceremony. Although Highhawk sings along in English, he has a song from the wrong ceremony. The Navajos treat Highhawk with courtesy, but refer to him as Flaky Man and "this Highhawk nut" behind his back. Like many whites who are obsessed with Native American culture, Highhawk's desire to become Indian is more about dissatisfaction with his own life and the meaning he projects onto Navajo culture than any real understanding.

He has created the Paho Society for the purpose of reburying all Native American skeletons in the museum's possession and returning artifacts to their rightful owners. He demands that the Smithsonian return the 18,000 Native American skeletons that they have in storage. Unfortunately, Highhawk's enthusiasm for this cause lead him into a conspiracy with a Chilean terrorist group. When Highhawk refuses to help the group plant a bomb in the Smithsonian, they murder him.

## Leroy Fleck

A small-time criminal pretending to be an undercover cop, Leroy Fleck is the primary villain and a study in contrasts. He considers himself a tolerant man, yet uses the n-word in referring to African American acquaintances. He loves his elderly mother, yet pays her nursing home bills by murdering a man. He is an efficient, silent killer, yet ineptly tries to follow people in a distinctive, rusty, dented Chevy.

Leroy's mother formed his character at an early age. She insisted that both Leroy and his brother Delmar get even with anyone for the smallest slight. Otherwise, their mother says, they - the ruling class - will win, and turn one into a wino and a bum. Leroy has followed his mother's philosophy all his life, from killing three men who raped him in prison to killing The Client, the security chief at the Chilean embassy. He constantly tries to seek his mother's approval by following her philosophy, even though eventually it ensures his death.



Leroy pays his mother's nursing home bills primarily by committing crimes. He desperately needs money to move his mother to a new nursing home and constantly threatens the nursing home director to delay that process. Despite Fleck's criminal acts, he is loyal and a good son.

## **Catherine Morris Perry**

Catherine Morris Perry is the stylish, upper-class lawyer for the Smithsonian. Her official title is Temporary Assistant Counsel, Public Affairs, on short-term loan to the Smithsonian from the Department of the Interior and she resents news reports that incorrectly identify her as museum spokesperson. Perry has a superior attitude, especially relating to her assistant, Markie Bailey.

## **Markie Bailey**

Mrs. Bailey is Catherine Morris Perry's receptionist-secretary at the Smithsonian, inherited from Perry's predecessor. There is a bit of class conflict in their relationship, because the middle-aged Bailey tries to be friendly to her younger boss, who deflects her personal questions. Perry would like to fire her subordinate, but civil service regulations make this almost impossible.

## **Miguel Santerno**

Also known as Rodolfo Gomez and Bad Hands, Santerno is the villain hired by officials at the Chilean Embassy to kill Henry Highhawk. Gomez's damaged hands hidden in black leather gloves prompt his Native American name, Bad Hands.

## **Janet Pete**

A beautiful, young Navajo attorney, Janet Pete has overcome her attraction to Office Jim Chee. She now lives in Washington, DC, where she works at the law firm of her millionaire lover and former university professor. She and Chee remain friends and confidants.

## **Mary Langdon**

Jim Chee's white girlfriend is a teacher who used to work on the reservation. Since she moved to Wisconsin, the two exchange letters. Mary breaks up with Chee, informing him that they are from two different worlds and can never be happy together.



## **Cassidy, Neal and Dalkin**

Three inmates at Joliet State Penitentiary who raped Leroy Flack when he was imprisoned as a young man. Following Mama's philosophy of getting even, Flack killed Cassidy using a knife technique similar to the one used to kill Santillanes.

## **Agnes Tsoisie**

Old Woman Tsoisie is matriarch of the Bitter Water Dinee, the same Navajo clan claimed by Henry Highhawk. Among her accomplishments, she has served on the Navajo Tribal Council twice and been instrumental in getting wells drilled so that water is available at every Chapter House. Her photo was included in a National Geographic story about the Navajo.

## **FBI Agent Joe Kennedy**

Kennedy, the FBI agent based in Gallup, suggests that his old friend Joe Leaphorn investigate the murder of a man near the train tracks. While Joe Leaphorn is still a gung-ho police officer, Kennedy long ago stopped caring about his cases. Instead, he just goes through the motions.

## **Deputy Sheriff Cowboy Dashee**

A friend of Officer Jim Chee since high school, Dashee is a Hopi who accompanies him to the Yeibichai ceremonial to arrest Henry Highhawk.

## **Elogio Santillanes**

The murdered man dressed in worn but expensive hand-tailored clothes and pointy shoes whose body is dumped in the desert is Old Man Santillanes. Uncovering the man's identity is further complicated because he uses the alias Hilario Madrid-Pena while traveling. Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn is first drawn into the investigation by Santillanes' murder.

## **John McDermott**

Janet Pete's lover is a former law school professor at the University of Arizona, now her millionaire boss and lover. McDermott symbolizes Anglo-European culture, especially wealth, attractive to many educated Navajos.



## **Roland Dockery**

Amtrak employee in charge of the lost luggage office in Washington, DC who tells Lieutenant Leaphorn what the train conductor said about the murder.

## **Captain P. J. Rodney**

A member of the District of Columbia police force and Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn's longtime friend.

## **Bernard St. Germain**

An acquaintance of Joe Leaphorn's who advises him on how Amtrak works and investigates whether the train from Washington D.C. was stopped by a passenger pulling the emergency switch on the night of the murder.

## **Dr. Caroline Hartman**

Henry Highhawk's boss at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, who tolerates his efforts on behalf of the Indians.

## **General Ramon Huerta Cardona**

Head of the secret police in Chile, the General claims that the jeweled golden mask is his personal property and says the museum should return it.

## **Eddy Elkins**

Elkins is a disbarred lawyer with ties to organized crime that Leroy Fleck met in prison. It was Elkins who told him Fleck's mother was right - he had to get revenge on the men who raped him. Elkins also taught him how to kill quickly and silently with a knife.

## **Alice Yoakum**

Museum security guard who is killed near the Twelfth Street entrance.

## **The Fat Man**

The director of the nursing home where Leroy Fleck's mother lives.

## **Mama Fleck**

Leroy Fleck's elderly mother, who believes in getting revenge for even the most insignificant slight. She is being kicked out of the nursing home by the Fat Man, due to her violent attacks of other patients.



# Objects/Places

## The American Southwest

Author Tony Hillerman is well known for his mysteries set in the American Southwest, especially the Four Corners region of New Mexico, Utah, Colorado and Arizona. Portions of this novel are set in that area. Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn is based in Window Rock, Arizona, but investigates a murder near Gallup, New Mexico.

## Washington, D.C.

Most of the novel is set in the nation's capitol of Washington D.C, also referred to as the District of Columbia. The city is home to many monuments and landmarks including the Washington Monument and the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.

## Smithsonian Museum of Natural History

The climactic action takes place in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. where the body of conservator Henry Highhawk is found.

## Sacred Masks of the Americas Exhibit

An temporary exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History that includes the Navajo Yeibichai mask and the jeweled golden Inca mask from Chile.

## Yeibichai Mask

The ceremonial mask of the Navajo Talking God, on display at the Smithsonian. A similar mask is used in a Night Chant ceremony at the beginning of the story.

## Tano War God Fetish

The Tano Indian people want the Smithsonian to return this small figurine carved from a tree root. It is of one of the Twin Tano War Gods.

## Jeweled Chilean Mask

An Inca mask from Chile, made of a gold-platinum alloy and encrusted with emeralds and other precious jewels.



## **Eldercare Manor**

A Washington, D.C. nursing home killer Leroy Fleck's mother is being kicked out of, due to violent behavior towards other residents.

## **Abandoned Luggage**

The murdered man's abandoned luggage contains clues including two ceramic pots wrapped in newspaper, a small notebook, and a cryptic list.

## **The Note**

A puzzling note found on the murdered man's body leads Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn to the Yeibichai ceremony for Agnes Tsosie.

## **Rusty, Dented Chevy**

Villain Leroy Fleck tries to follow Henry Highhawk around town in a conspicuous, rusted, dented Chevy with a bent antenna.





# Themes

## Respect for Navajo Culture

Respect for traditional Navajo culture is a powerful theme in *Talking Gods*. Author Tony Hillerman does not portray Indians as backwards, undeveloped or ignorant. Instead, he acknowledges the validity of the Navajo system of beliefs, and celebrates its strengths. Hillerman does not denigrate other cultures, but he emphasizes Navajo mythology, social patterns and traditions.

The novel touches briefly on many different aspects of Navajo culture, without going into any in depth. Patience is valued, and time spent waiting is time spent living, not wasted time. There is a strong need for order and harmony, and a respect for agreement. Every Navajo belongs to two clans, the father's and the more important mother's clan. Clan members feel an obligation to care for each other, including sharing money and lending possessions. In fact, this propensity to take turns using possessions that are shared by all leads to the negative "Indian-giver" stereotype.

The contrast between Navajo and Anglo-American cultures is particularly obvious in the way they handle the homeless. Officer Jim Chee is shocked to see a homeless mentally ill man sleeping under the bushes in the nation's capitol, within sight of national landmarks like the Washington Monument. While there are many disabled people on the reservation, and alcoholism is a particular problem, the clans make it a point to take care of them. Chee is amazed that not one of the well-dressed people walking past tries to help the man.

The elderly are treated with kindness and concern in Navajo culture, in contrast to Anglo-American culture. Agnes "Old Woman" Tsosie is the active matriarch of her Bitter Water Clan. The clan turns to her to settle disputes and impart wisdom. When Tsosie develops terminal liver cancer, her family takes her home to die surrounded by love. Tsosie's beloved son-in-law moves her bed outside to the brush arbor, where she can see the sky and enjoy the beauty of the mountains. Leroy Fleck pays thousands of dollars to keep his aged mother in a nursing home where she is left unattended, tied to her wheelchair in a room that smells of urine. This raises the question: how advanced is a culture that treats the elderly in this shameful way?

Many Navajo illustrate the ability to bridge the gap between Anglo-American culture and Navajo tradition. Nancy Yabenny, the crystal gazer summoned by Rollie Yellow when his mother-in-law is dying, is a clerk/typist. Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn uses western-style logic and even wears a business suit when necessary to establish rapport with police officers in other areas. Yet, Leaphorn's Navajo need for balance and harmony drive him to seek the cause and effect in even the most insignificant crimes.



## Lost Love

Both of the detectives in *Talking God* are suffering with broken hearts, and both deal with that pain by immersing themselves in work. Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn's wife Emma has recently died after a long illness. He misses her constantly, such as when he eats his own cooking and when he returns to an empty house at the end of the day. Leaphorn particularly misses discussing his cases with Emma and listening to her common-sense insights about them. When he is unable to solve a perplexing murder, he misses Emma telling him that it is all right, he is still a good detective. Leaphorn is overdue to take some time off from work, but he dreads vacationing alone. His solution is to use his vacation time investigating a crime in Washington, DC. Because he will be working, this will be more like a business trip on his own, a familiar situation.

Early in the novel Officer Jim Chee's white schoolteacher girlfriend, Mary Langdon, breaks up with him by letter. Mary points out that she wants to raise her children in the predominant Anglo-American culture and does not want their opportunities to be limited by living on the reservation. Yet, she knows that Jim Chee will never be happy away from his people and his culture. Even if Chee makes the sacrifice to move to Wisconsin, he will be miserable - and that will make Mary Langdon unhappy. Jim Chee and Mary Langdon's love is doomed because they come from two different worlds. Despite his heartbreak, Chee comes to see the wisdom of Mary's decision and agrees with it.

There is a potential romance between Officer Jim Chee and attorney Janet Pete. As the story opens, Chee is attracted to Janet Pete but they close friends, not romantic partners. There are two reasons for this. The first is that Janet Pete is in a romantic relationship with millionaire John McDermott, her former law school professor and current boss. The second reason is that Janet Pete has moved away from the reservation and embraced Anglo-American culture, a decision she comes to regret as the story unfolds. When Chee gives Janet Pete the Tano War God fetish, she has a choice to make. She can continue her relationship with McDermott and embrace Anglo-American culture by giving the figurine to her lover. On the other hand, Janet Pete can embrace traditional Navajo culture and restore harmony by giving the fetish directly to the Tano people. She chooses the Navajo way, cutting ties with McDermott and making her a potential romantic partner for Jim Chee.

## Ethical Issues for Museums

Museums face a number of ethical issues that are highlighted in *Talking Gods*. Institutions like the Smithsonian Natural History Museum preserve ancient relics for scholars to research and preserve knowledge about earlier civilizations. However, when artifacts of current cultures like the Navajo tradition are displayed like exotic animals in a zoo, it dehumanizes and trivializes people who still practice that culture. There is a fine line between learning about other cultures and judging them in a condescending way.

In many cases, items in the Smithsonian and other museums have dubious provenance. The Navajo Yeibichai mask in the museum never belonged to one particular person.



Instead, like the stained glass window in a church, it was a religious icon that belonged to the entire community, or congregation. Therefore, even if the person who was keeping the mask in his home at the time offered it to the museum, it was not his property to give away. This misunderstanding is compounded by the different ways that some traditional cultures view ownership of personal possessions. The original "Indian-giver" may well have expected that the museum would display the mask for a few months or years, and then return it so he could use it again.

The myriad corridors of the Smithsonian are packed with storage cases piled to the ceiling. Some of those contain more than 18,000 skeletons of Native Americans that have been unearthed, often from sacred burial grounds. As Jim Chee points out, this was done by an earlier generation of archaeologists who believed they were doing essential research into a vanishing way of life. However, the museum in many cases refuses to return the skeletons. There is not a lot of difference between an archaeologist digging up Navajo skeletons and Henry Highhawk digging up the bones of a museum employee's grandparents. Yet, Highhawk is charged with a crime while archeologists are applauded.

In some cases when ownership can be proven, museums have returned ancient relics. However, the issue becomes even more complicated when the items have inherent monetary value, as the jeweled golden Inca mask from Chile does. In this case, greed is the major reason why Chile is requesting the return of this national treasure. If the mask were returned, it would almost undoubtedly fall into the hands of the unethical General Cardonas, because his family owned it at one time. Cardonas might very well auction the mask to the highest bidder. Even worse, he might melt the gold alloy and remove the jewels to sell separately, destroying a vital piece of art from the vanished Inca civilization. None of these perplexing ethical issues have easy solutions.



# Style

## Point of View

Talking God is written in third person omniscient point of view. Different chapters and in some cases different scenes within the same chapter are told in the point of view of a different character. This technique is essential because there is no one character who is privy to all the details of the story. In particular, Officer Jim Chee and Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn are each investigating a different crime. The point of view shifts are managed deftly and seamlessly, so that the reader feels great emotional involvement in the story by seeing it through a character's eyes. The different points of view in alternating chapters also inherently increase the tension in the story, as the reader eagerly awaits the next step in Leaphorn's or Chee's investigation.

The first chapter is the only one told from Catherine Morris Perry's point of view, and in fact, Perry is never mentioned again in the story. Presenting this chapter from her perspective allows the reader to feel shocked that her grandparent's bones have been dug up by Henry Highhawk. Chapter two starts with Agnes Tsosie's point of view, although it shifts to that of her son-in-law Rollie Yellow and then to Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn's perspective.

Subsequent chapters switch from Leaphorn's point of view to Jim Chee's as each detective pursues his own investigation. Chapters three, six, eight, ten, thirteen and fifteen are told from Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn's point of view. Chapters four, seven, nine, eleven and fourteen are in Officer Jim Chee's point of view. Occasional chapters in villain Leroy Fleck's point of view including chapters five, twelve and sixteen add tension and illustrate the killer's complex character.

Beginning in chapter seventeen, Leaphorn and Chee are united. In chapters seventeen and nineteen, the point of view shifts between the two detectives. Chapters eighteen and twenty are from Leroy Fleck's point of view, as he plots a crime spree. Chapter twenty-one shifts from Chee's point of view to Leaphorn's to Fleck's and back again. Chapter twenty-two returns to Jim Chee's point of view.

## Setting

The novel takes place in the American Southwest and Washington, DC. Much of the action is set inside the Smithsonian Museum in the nation's capitol. The author's use of actual locations such as Gallup, Window Rock, Fort Defiance, complete with brief but compelling descriptions, lend realism to the story.

The story opens in the American Southwest near the Navajo Indian reservation. This area, near the Four Corners of Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico includes arid desert and snowy mountainous regions. Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Officer Jim Chee are Navajo Tribal Police officers stationed at different towns in this region. Leaphorn is



stationed at Window Rock while Chee works in Shiprock. Important locations in the story include the Tsose homestead, where the Night Chant or Yeibichai ceremony is conducted and where Jim Chee arrests Henry Highhawk.

Both men are drawn into criminal investigations that take them to Washington, DC, a world apart from the desert. In this urban environment they find people impersonal, self-absorbed and unkind. Much of the story's action takes place at the landmark Smithsonian Natural History Museum in the nation's capitol. Other features of the city that are explored are the subway or Metro, the hotels where the two detectives stay and Henry Highhawk's narrow townhouse on a street crowded with other homes.

## Language and Meaning

Talking God is told primarily in scene using action and dialogue, with only short passages of description and very little summary. This technique immerses the reader in the action of the compelling story. Word choice is used to convey subtle nuances of meaning. Catherine Morris Perry thinks of her subordinate as a receptionist-secretary, a more demeaning term than executive secretary or administrative assistant. Perry's use of the term "Indian-giver" also illustrates her lack of sympathy for cultures whose artifacts have been appropriated by the Smithsonian. By the same token, Perry thinks of the skeletons on display at the museum as the "remains" of "aboriginals", while she thinks of the items in the box as bones of her beloved ancestors.

Author Tony Hillerman conveys respect for various cultural traditions by using the words that group members use to describe themselves. He regularly uses the term Indian in preference to the more politically correct Native American. One can argue that this term is more accurate, since anyone born in the US is technically a native American. More importantly, however, it is how members of the group refer to themselves. By the same token, he uses Hispano instead of Hispanic.

Realism is added by the occasional use of words in the Navajo language, especially by Officer Jim Chee. These include Dinee for Navajo and hataalii for medicine man or shaman. The term belagaana, defined in the text, refers to whites but also to any person who is not Navajo, Hopi or a member of a related tribe. In describing the American Southwest, Hillerman references native plants like chaimisa and sagebrush.

## Structure

The fast-paced novel is told in linear fashion, in scene, with few flashbacks and relatively little back-story. The story focuses primarily on characters engaged in action. One of the few places where significant flashbacks are used is in chapter twelve, to illuminate the history and personality of Leroy Fleck. The author relies on significant detail and word choice to evoke a sense of place, rather than long descriptive passages.



The 338 page book is divided into twenty-two numbered chapters of unequal length. The shortest chapter is the second, which only has five pages. Chapter fourteen is the longest, with thirty-four pages. The first two chapters are short and establish the two settings of the story in Washington, DC and the American Southwest. Each includes a character that will never be seen again. In the first chapter it is Catherine Morris Perry and in the second chapter, Agnes Tsosie.

These are followed by two longer chapters of nineteen to twenty pages, each of which focus on one of the two detectives and his criminal investigation. Tension is built by switching between the two detectives in alternating chapters, averaging about twelve pages each during the middle section of the book. An occasional chapter focusing on the irrational killer Leroy Fleck increases tension. The two detectives are united in chapter seventeen and appear together in subsequent chapters. The tension of the story builds in chapters nineteen and twenty to the climax in chapter twenty-one, where the two detectives defuse a terrorist's bomb, apprehend the bomber and save dozens of lives. The denouement occurs in chapter twenty-two, when Jim Chee gives the Tano War God fetish to Janet Pete and makes plans to return home.



## Quotes

"Through the doorway which lead from her receptionist-secretary's office to her own, Catherine Morris Perry instantly noticed the box on her desk. It was bulky - perhaps three feet long and almost as high."

Chap. 1, p. 1

"Born for Water told Monster Slayer to leave Death alive to get rid of old people like me. You have to make some room for the new babies."

Chap. 2, p. 10

"On the Bitter Water Dinee she imposed her rigid rules of peace. Once, she had kept a meeting of two Bitter Water families in session for eleven days until - out of hunger and exhaustion - they settled a grazing rights feud that had rankled for a hundred years."

Chap. 2, p. 11

"'I heard something-or-other,' Leaphorn said - which meant a secondhand report of what had been overheard by the radio dispatcher downstairs."

Chap. 3, p. 15

"The body was under the sheltering limbs of a clump of chaimisa, protected from the slanting morning sun by an adjoining bush. From where he stood on the gravel of the railroad embankment, Leaphorn could see the soles of two shoes, their pointed toes aimed upward, two dark gray pant legs, a white shirt, a necktie, a suit coat, still buttoned, and a ground's-eye view of a pale narrow face with oddly pouched cheeks."

Chap. 3, p. 17

"'Henry Highhawk,' Captain Largo had said, handing him the folder. ;Usually when they decide to turn Indian and call themselves something like Whitecloud, or Squatting Bear, or Highhawk, they decide they're going to be Cherokees.'"

Chap. 4, p. 35

"Mama had told him...the only way you kept your head up, the only way to keep from being a bum and a wino, was by getting even."

Chap. 5, p. 63

"The gums showed the victim secured his teeth with a standard fixative. Therefore either the fellow had been killed while his teeth were out, or they had been removed after his death."

Chap. 6, p. 67

"She didn't want her children raised on the reservation, bringing them up as strangers to her own culture. He wouldn't be happy away from the reservation. And if he made the sacrifice for her, she would be miserable because she had made him miserable."

Chap. 7, p. 78





"While in many ways Joe Leaphorn had moved into the world of the whites, his Navajo requirement for order and harmony remained."

Chap. 8, p. 88

"In summation, you'll want the same sort of stuff we'd do if the Emperor of Earth had been kidnapped by the Martians. Cost eighty-six billions in overtime and then it turns out that your body is a car dealer who got in an argument with somebody in the bar of the train and it's not the business of the Bureau."

Chap. 8, p. 95

"'This isn't Shiprock,' she said. 'You don't just keep seeing a stranger in Washington. Not unless you work in the same place. Or eat in the same place. Millions of people. But I saw this man outside the building where we have our law offices.'"

Chap. 9, p. 103

"He must look distinctly different: his best felt reservation hat with its silver band, his best leather jacket, his best boots, his rawboned, weather-beaten, homely Navajo face. But the only glances he drew were quick and secretive. He was politely ignored. That seemed odd to Chee."

Chap. 11, p. 123

"I'd noticed this passenger wasn't feeling all that great so I went by his compartment to see if he needed any help. I heard somebody moving in there but when I tapped on the door, nobody answered. I thought that was funny."

Chap. 13, p. 156

"Leaphorn thought, the news I am bringing her is not news. It is something she anticipated. Something her instincts told her was inevitable."

Chap. 13, p. 167

"'I think we have more drunks per capita than anybody,' Chee said. 'But on the reservation we try to pick them up. We try to put them somewhere.'"

Chap. 14, p. 187

"'Bingo,' Kennedy said. 'I am sort of a hero with the Bureau this morning - which will last until about sundown. Your Elogio Santillanes was in the Bureau print files.'"

Chap. 15, p. 212

"'I know who you are,' Fleck said. 'I followed you back to your embassy. I get paid or I can cause you some trouble.'"

Chap. 16, p. 237

"Jim Chee had never seen the legendary Leaphorn except in a Navajo Tribal Police uniform. He was having psychological trouble handling this inappropriate attire. Like a necktie on a herd bull, Chee thought. Like socks on a billy goat."

Chap. 17, p. 239





"'I'm thinking that this is the world's best place to hide a body,' Chee said, slowly. 'Tens of thousands of cases and containers lining the halls.'"

Chap. 18, p. 257

"He had rationalized his Navajo conditioning to avoid the dead, but he hadn't eliminated the ingrained knowledge that while the body died, the chindi lingered to cause ghost sickness and evil dreams."

Chap. 19, p. 282

"Talking God is one of the powerful supernatural spirits of that great tribe, one of the connections between the Navajo and the great all-powerful Creating God."

Chap. 19, p. 289

"If the Client wouldn't come out, he would wait. He would get him eventually. He would get as many of them as he could."

Chap. 20, p. 307

"'I'll get the mask,' Chee said."

Chap. 21, p. 314

"Leaphorn always thought things through, always planned, always minimized the opportunity for error. It was a lifelong habit, it was the source of his reputation as the man to handle impossible cases. Now he had only a few seconds to think and no time at all to plan."

Chap. 21, p. 318

"Chee, a believer in the Navajo custom of never interrupting anyone, interrupted her."

Chap. 22, p. 331



## Topics for Discussion

How does Navajo treatment of the elderly differ from the way very old people are usually treated in the U.S.?

Author Tony Hillerman creates a very complex character in killer Leroy Fleck. What are some of Fleck's unexpected qualities?

When Agnes Tsosie is diagnosed with terminal liver cancer, she decides not to seek treatment. Instead, she calls her relatives to come take her home, where she can die surrounded by friends. What are the pros and cons of her decision?

Henry Highhawk digs up the bones of Catherine Morris Perry's grandparents from the cemetery in a churchyard, and is arrested for desecration of a grave. Is this the same as an archeologist digging up the bones of Navajos? Why or why not?

Leroy Fleck's mother believes that one must get revenge for even the most minor slight. This philosophy, of not letting anyone walk on her, was the primary focus of her life. Fleck has adopted this guiding principal. How does this belief influence Leroy Fleck's life?

At the end of the book, Officer Jim Chee walks out of the Smithsonian with the authentic Yeibichai Mask and Tano War God Fetish, leaving replicas in the museum. Is it fair for him to steal back items that were basically stolen in the first place? Why or why not?

White schoolteacher Mary Langdon and Navajo policeman Jim Chee are in love, yet they come from different worlds. Would they ever be happy making a life together? If so, would they live in Wisconsin or on the Navajo reservation?