

THE BOOK REPORT



Navajo novelist

For 'Hunting Badger,' Tony Hillerman returns to familiar turf

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Tony Hillerman is bursting with updates. Not only will his latest mystery, "Hunting Badger," hit bookstores Tuesday, but so will his publisher, HarperCollins, has just signed him to a multimillion-dollar, three-book deal. And the real-life manhunt that inspired this thriller is just jumped back into the news.

Making headlines once more is the true tale from May 1998 of two thugs who, when stopped by Colorado police, fired at the cops — killing one and injuring

others — then fled into the canyons between the Utah and Arizona border, never to be spotted again.

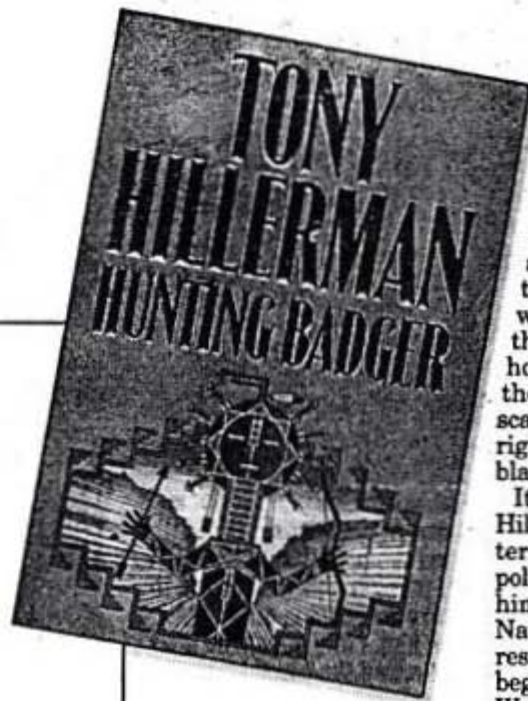
Speaking by phone from his home in Albuquerque, N.M., Hillerman reports that just the other day, "a couple of Navajos found the body of one of those banditos. He was under a bush, partly decomposed, with a rifle, a pistol, five pipe bombs, a bullet-proof vest and one of those new military helmets. They don't know what killed him yet. It could have been his buddy.



"I love mysteries, right?" he adds.

Now 74, Hillerman has been loving and writing mysteries for years — and shows no sign of slowing down.

For "Hunting Badger," Hillerman's 14th Navajo mystery, his thieving characters rob the Ute Mountain Casino, make off with some dough and also disappear. And the author has the FBI,



At 74, "Hunting Badger" author Tony Hillerman has just signed a multimillion-dollar book deal.

which he tweaks as the "Federal Bureau of Ineptitude," bungling this fictional manhunt much as they did the actual one a year and a half ago.

"I have a lot of respect for the FBI," says Hillerman. "They're good at uncovering malfeasance in other agencies. They're good at all that high-tech stuff." But he readily sides with the local

cops, who often resent the FBI coming in, taking over and rarely seeking their advice.

"One of my friends in the Navajo police told me he called his guys in and said, 'Look, the FBI's taking over now. We know we're never gonna catch these guys until they go home, so just remember they're going to need a scapegoat. So do everything right; let's not let them blame us.'"

It's not surprising that Hillerman is on such good terms with the Navajo police. He made a name for himself portraying the Navajo culture with utmost respect and accuracy. It all began with "The Blessing Way" (1970), a mystery featuring Lt. Joe Leaphorn. Hillerman recalls being both delighted and abashed to see that mystery in print.

"It was a purple dust jacket, and they'd taken the Indian right off the old buffalo nickel — an Eastern Woodlands Mohawk with a Roman nose," says Hillerman. "There's never been a Navajo born who looked like that."

That insulting stereotype — that one Indian is just like another — is exactly the sort of ignorance he's combated so cleverly with his mysteries.

His hero Leaphorn is a modern Navajo, logical, sharp and generally assimilated. Although Hillerman's books had always sold consistently, albeit modestly, it wasn't until the '80s, when he teamed Leaphorn with new character Jimmy Chee — a younger, traditional Navajo, who is a more instinctive, action-oriented cop — that the Navajo series vaulted onto the best-seller list.

Since then, Hillerman's mysteries have sold millions of copies worldwide, and garnered him the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America and, most meaningfully, the "Friend of the Dineh" award from the Navajo Tribe.

The writer is currently at work on his memoir. "I'm 19 years old right now, and I'm in the Third General Hospital in France," says Hillerman, who was wounded during World War II. The memoir may even explain the mystery in his author's bio: how he achieved the rank of private first class — *twice*.

When asked about it, Hillerman laughs. "I hadn't got around to throwing the damn stripes on, and a platoon sergeant thought that signified a certain lack of respect for the United States Army and took them away from me."

Now Hillerman continues to earn his stripes with each book he writes.