



The Shape Shifter

Tony Hillerman

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Since his retirement from the Navajo Tribal Police, Joe Leaphorn has occasionally been enticed to return to work by former colleagues who seek his help when they need to solve a particularly puzzling crime. They ask because Leaphorn, aided by officers Jim Chee and Bernie Manuelito, always delivers.

But this time the problem is with an old case of Joe's--his "last case," unsolved, is one that continues to haunt him. And with Chee and Bernie just back from their honeymoon, Leaphorn is pretty much on his own.

The original case involved a priceless, one-of-a-kind Navajo rug supposedly destroyed in a fire. Suddenly, what looks like the same rug turns up in a magazine spread. And the man who brings the photo to Leaphorn's attention has gone missing. Leaphorn must pick up the threads of a crime he'd thought impossible to untangle. Not only has the passage of time obscured the details, but it also appears that there's a murderer still on the loose.

New York Times bestselling author Tony Hillerman is at the top of his form in this atmospheric and riveting novel set amid the rugged beauty of his beloved Southwest.

The Shape Shifter Details

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Author : Tony Hillerman

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From Reader Review The Shape Shifter for online ebook

David Cain says

This was an enjoyable book that didn't quite live up to its potential. Perhaps if it were twice as long, the additional detail would make up for the minor shortcomings sprinkled throughout the work's structure. Not so much of a mystery, but more of a suspense thriller. There were few misdirections and it was easy to guess how things were going to turn out relatively early in the narrative. The broad variety of plot elements (Indian weaving history, Navajo and Hmong religious beliefs, Vietnam war activities, etc) was certainly interesting, although the disparate elements were, for the most part, never really integrated in a convincing and coherent way. The ending felt rushed, and many of the important plot elements were completely ignored at the conclusion. That said, it was still a fun story. My wife and I listened to the unabridged audiobook as we drove from southeast Utah to northern Colorado. It was a lot of fun to hear about the Four Corners locations as we drove through that same environment. George Guidall provides an excellent narration - his voice is clear, interesting, and he pronounces most of the Navajo words convincingly (though he is perhaps a bit less accurate with the Hmong pronunciations). I had never heard of this series before, and did not even know until afterward that this book was even part of a series, let alone the eighteenth book. It certainly works on its own merits, and can be enjoyed even if you've never read any of the previous volumes.

Kelly Nielsen says

one of the least memorable of this series.

Ivonne Rovira says

[Almost immediately, readers will suspect that Shewnack, one of the FBI's most wanted due to a crime spree that stretched throughout the Southwest, didn't die in that incredibl

Marissa says

I read this book in candlelight with the backdrop of howling wind and torrential rain. The blackout we had yesterday created the perfect setting for reading The Shape Shifter.

Skinwalkers, according to Navajo culture, are creatures that embody evil. They can change shape and form-- and not for good purposes! So when retired Navajo Tribal Policemen Joe Leaphorn gets tangled up in a decades old mystery and finds himself face to face with a modern-day skinwalker, it takes everything he has to outwit him.

Hillerman is a masterful storyteller. The way he incorporates Native American mythology is fascinating. I loved the pacing in this book. Hillerman knows how to set up a story and create suspense. I also really liked how the book begins with Leaphorn telling his experience with "the shapeshifter" to his friends, segues into the story, then wraps up with Leaphorn leaving the end of the story in suspense for his friends until another time (though we, as the reader, know the ending). His characters are extremely likable, especially Leaphorn. Though this is the first Hillerman book I've read, it seems that Leaphorn is a recurring main character in his

books.

The only possible criticism I have is that I thought the way the "shapeshifter" was killed (I won't reveal who it is, of course) was done so quickly it was almost a little anti-climactic. I also wished we learned more about his history, because he was an intriguing villain.

I don't think I would have picked this book up on my own, if not for the fact that we needed to read a recent Spur award winner for my Readers' Advisory class. I'm glad I chose this book for and I will be reading more of Hillerman's books in the future.

I also love how I always seem to find books without meaning to where the characters talk about or have degrees in Anthropology. Having a BA in Anthro myself, I always enjoy reading about characters that have that commonality.

Amy says

Had a hard time getting into this one.

Carmen says

This is the last Navajo Mystery penned by Tony Hillerman.

It's also one of the most boring. Hillerman just goes on and on and on and on about old Navajo folklore - no, **more** than usual - and other subjects and it gets very tiresome. My eyes were glazing over at various times.

Chee and Bernie are barely in the novel, this is a Leaphorn novel almost exclusively. The old retired cop solving a cold case.

The case itself is interesting and wraps up nicely.

Louisa and Leaphorn make a kind of final decision not to get married.

"You know, Louisa, we could save this paperwork, this sort of thing, if you would just go ahead and marry me."

She smiled at him. "You have probably just established a Ripley's Believe It Or Not record for the most unromantic proposal ever made."

"It wasn't intended to be romantic," Leaphorn said. "It was intended to be just downright practical."

Louisa turns him down, saying that he's too good of a friend to ruin with something like marriage, and

Leaphorn let that hang there. He was noticing that his reaction to her reaction was a sort of relief.

He is sad but also relieved that they are not going to be a romantic couple, just friends.

I don't have much else to say. I figured out the whole mystery very early, about 80 or 90 pages in - it wasn't that difficult to figure out. But still a very solid and fun plot.

Tl;dr - A solid and fun mystery powered only by Joe Leaphorn, with mere cameos by Jim Chee and his (view spoiler) Bernie. The drawbacks of the novel are a.) it's quite easy to figure out and solve and b.) Hillerman shows no self-restraint with his long ramblings in this novel. Seriously. I felt as if I could skip whole chapters which contained nothing except Leaphorn reciting Navajo myths - many of which were already explained in depth in previous novels.

I wish I could say Hillerman went out on a high note, but that isn't the case.

P.S. Bernie returns to police work and being a cop in this novel.

Dagny says

This is the last one of the series which was published before Hillerman's death. I didn't read it for a long time because I was *saving* it. The beginning started me wondering how much I would enjoy it, but I got very caught up with the story and it ended up being a great read for me.

Hillerman's daughter, Anne, is continuing the series with the characters. I'll be reading her first one in the near future.

Shannon says

A great last story by Hillerman - can't wait to see what his daughter does as she picks up the series. This one is really a Leaphorn mystery and it's an interesting one involving a con man who finally gets caught after years and years of crimes. A ruthless man, he also has a Laotian 'man servant' that he 'employed' since the child was young (Vang). Throughout the story there's a lot of questions about all parties involved (except Leaphorn, of course) but it works out in the end.

Tristan MacAvery says

I've generally enjoyed the stories of Joe Leaphorn, now retired by this particular volume. Leaphorn is a traditionalist in many ways, and Hillerman's creation of the character is inextricably interwoven with his (the character's) experiences. As such, delving into a Leaphorn tale is to explore yet another of the many facets of the policeman's history, his upbringing, his heritage, and the way that his mind works. For some, this involved process of storytelling seems slow, or even irrelevant to the flow of the mystery at hand.

This particular book does seem slower than previous tales, and I wouldn't recommend it to someone just cutting their teeth on this otherwise very interesting character. The many convolutions of plot, combined with something that is, to some degree, a McGuffin in the shape of a cursed hand-woven rug will irritate those who want their plots to move at swifter pace. The conclusion of the book satisfies its requirements, but without a great deal of surprise, and without that sense of true satisfaction that comes with a properly surprising conclusion. "This happened, that was the result, and we're done."

Earlier books in Hillerman's series will provide a better introduction, particularly *Dance Hall of the Dead*, my first and perhaps most favorite of the Navajo mysteries.

Douglas Cook says

First sentence

Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, retired, stopped his pickup about a hundred yards short of where he had intended to park, turned off the ignition, stared at Sergeant Jim Chee's trailer home, and reconsidered his tactics.

Hillerman, Tony (2009-10-13). *The Shape Shifter* (Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee) (Kindle Locations 60-61). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Michael says

Definitely a worthwhile experience to partake of Hillerman's last book. Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo tribal police is retired, but he can't resist poking around asking questions when he learns an acquaintance has died in a car wreck while investigating an insurance fraud case. Starting with an odd incident of stolen pine sap, one clue leads to another, and soon Joe is led to a seemingly unlikely theory that can only be resolved through a trip to a remote hunting camp for a dangerous confrontation with his suspect. In this case, he does not have Sergeant Jim Chee to help him on the case. His main partner in solving the case is a Hmong servant of the bad guy, who was brought by him as a boy from Laos after his service in Special Operations in the Vietnam War.

I love the way Leaphorn's mind works and his drive for true justice. Though unlike Chee he is no true believer in the myths of his people, he finds a lot of truth in their belief that evil arises from a loss of harmony with the natural world. I do too. The darker side of the American dream, arising inexorably from the desire to accumulate wealth and pride in accomplishment, can readily be linked to the current threats to sustainability of the planetary ecosystem.

An icon for such evil in this tale is an antique tapestry that portrays the history of "The Long Walk", the forced march in 1863-64 of thousands of Navajo away from their sacred mountains to an internment camp 450 miles away, at the cost of hundreds of deaths. Honoring such a rug would not be consistent with the Navajo concept of healing, and seeking profit from such an artifact represents bad juju of the highest order. In the story here, the premise is that the rug, which was supposed to have burned up in the fire of a trading post many years ago, has turned up in the possession of a wealthy dealer. A person last visited by the dead insurance investigator.

Along the way, Leaphorn draws his new Hmong friend out on the history of his people, finding interesting comparisons with the travails of the Navajo. Analogies in their religion over creation myths and the origins of evil provided a nice backdrop to the tale. All in all, this was a satisfying ending to the series. Hillerman created a wonderful series of 18 mystery novels before his death in 2008, and I will miss his voice.

Timons Esaias says

I bought this because it was the last Hillerman, having read all the others, but the truth is that this is only a glorified first draft of a Hillerman novel, and it should never have been published in this condition. I'd have given it one star, if not for the sentimental attachment to the series.

This is almost entirely a Joe Leaphorn story; with Jim Chee and Bernadette Chee (yep, it happened) given brief appearances at the beginning and the end. That's disappointing, and I'm not sure it was the original intent. Indeed, I have some suspicions that this novel stems from an earlier Leaphorn-has-just-retired manuscript that got shelved. But having only one POV reduces the plot richness that was standard in the better Hillerman stories.

The novel follows a cold case. A retired officer sends Leaphorn a letter, with a lifestyle magazine picture that includes an old Navajo rug in it. A rug that was reported as having burned up, in a case that Leaphorn worked on in his early days. Then the retired officer disappears. Leaphorn tries to find out what's going on, unofficially, and complications ensue. I love the last three paragraphs of the novel, but I strongly dislike the cliché ending that has Leaphorn behaving totally out of character. (It's a bad (by which I mean stupid) cliché that TV cop series always turn to when they run out of ideas.)

This is a four-grimace novel (about standard for Hillerman), but now I'll get to the 2-star issues. I read a goodly number of books in manuscript as part of my job, and this is clearly a first draft that somebody (most likely not Hillerman) cleaned up a bit so they could publish it. It has numerous plotting and narrating errors, where he forgets to tell us someone is in a scene, or forgets to mention a clue but brings it up later, or the text contradicts itself. The story forgets which highway the vehicle is on, or repeats information a second or third time, as though Leaphorn hadn't already learned this something.

Very tellingly, we keep getting told that Leaphorn has retired, and doesn't seem to know how to adapt. It comes up CONSTANTLY, which was not Hillerman's style. But here's the thing: Leaphorn retired four or five books earlier than this. He's been retired, but this book doesn't seem to be aware of that.

A good Hillerman scene has about three things going on in it. If there's a conversation there's usually another thread going on in the character's mind, and yet a third thread going on in the actions. Here we're lucky to have one thing happening at once. It has what I call (technical term) "oatmeal scenes," in which two characters are exchanging information, but nothing else is actually happening. So we get every bite they eat mentioned, every refilling of the coffee cups, every sip from the coffee cups. This is what writers do in the first draft, but in the rewrite they take all that nonsense out, and lay in another storyline between the bits of dialogue, which intensifies the scene, and enriches the book. But not this book.

Because this is a first draft, the ending doesn't really work, and there are numerous little logic errors near the end. Hillerman had set up a very nice, tense confrontation, fraught with danger, for the climax. But he didn't know what to do, and that shows when Leaphorn can't even come up with a plan. So we get the narrator telling us that Leaphorn can't think of what to do, which weakens the motivation. This is the stuff a writer puts on paper when they're stuck, or lost, and which they'll discuss with their editor before revising. Obviously that didn't take place in this case.

Honestly, this book needs to be retired from the Leaphorn/Chee canon, and allowed to go out of print. The last three paragraphs (and their setup) are not worth it.

Polo says

An entertaining summer read, which for me brought up thoughts on aging, culture, letting go of the past and other ruminations. That said, its not a deep philosophical book, its a book of puzzles and mystery. I enjoyed the setting of Four Corners area. There are some inconsistencies if one focused on measuring all the details. For me, that's not important when reading a book for entertainment.

Christine Henry says

Though I read this out of sequence in the series, which is uncharacteristic of me, I thought it was another wonderful and thought provoking story about values, morality, and how experiences shape a world view. There were two themes that I thought very intriguing: first, the theme of retirement, and what that stage of life means to some people. The way that US society sees retirement is somewhat contradictory: after a lifetime of work trying to improve skills and learn lessons, a person is left to shelve all of that knowledge and enjoy stepping out of the mainstream of activity, often without the opportunity to share all of that accumulated knowledge. In this narrative, the main character is a retired police officer, but this role still defines not only his self-image, but his place within the community.

The other theme that left me thinking was the impact of separating people from their cultural roots--which in this story takes the form of removing Indian children from their homes and sending them to boarding schools and how that shapes their world view for their entire life. Hillerman draws direct parallels with the policies currently being enacted in Iraq. This, of course, got me thinking about cultural resources and historic buildings in the US and the general lack of connection with cultural roots, and how our policies and funding reflect this sense of culture being an "extra" rather than essential to engaged citizenship.

John Cheeseman says

I'm a quite sad that this series has come to an end as the main characters in it are like old friends and i am going to miss them after all this time together. The one thing I'm glad about is that the series ended on quite a high as this was certainly one of the more decent books.

There was no fireworks or massive coming together of storylines but just a solid mystery thriller where although you'll probably guess the "twist" pretty early on and feel smug outwitting the brilliant Detective Leaphorn, you never actually know what is going to happen until the end. One of the things I've loved so much about all of these books is the insight into Native American beliefs and customs and although they seemed to become less important as the series progressed this book tied together some of the more beautiful concepts of the Navajo religion.

Sarah says

So, maybe I would've liked this book better if I had read all 17 that came before it. That being said, I found the mystery aspect to be lackluster and not very thrilling. Maybe that's how they all are, but I really wasn't drawn in by any of the characterizations.

My favorite aspect of the book is the description of the atmosphere and mystique of the Southwest. I just love the landscape there and Hillerman does an excellent job transporting me to this place; he does it with such skill that it seems foreign and new. He also does a fine job of infusing the people into this landscape, along with their traditions and mythology.

So, after having only read the first one in this series, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn is now retired and sort of operating outside of the law when he gets involved with a cold case from his youth. This case involves the "Woven Sorrow" rug that was supposedly burned in a fire years before, and has reappeared in a decorating magazine. This then leads to a series of murders that were never solved that go back decades. Then Leaphorn's partner in this case, Bork, turns up dead which then leads him to millionaire Jason Delos and his servant, Tommy Vang. Their relationship is strange and strained to say the least. This isn't really the type of mystery I usually enjoy, but from what I've heard, the series as a whole is quite enjoyable. If you are a fan of Leaphorn's partner Jim Chee, this is not the book for you, as Chee only makes a few brief appearances.

I found the resolution to be a little hasty and there are a few loose ends that I'm still wondering about. I guess I will just have to use my imagination...

David says

You know how actors and people in some other fields get "lifetime achievement awards," and sometimes they get an Oscar not so much for the movie for which they are ostensibly getting the Oscar, but because they have been around a long time and everyone loves them and they're probably not gonna turn in any more real Oscar-winning performances, so let 'em have the shiny gold dude now?

That's kind of why I'm giving *The Shape Shifter* five stars.

I first encountered Tony Hillerman as a freshman in college. I took an elective cultural anthropology course, just because, and one of the assigned books was *The Blessing Way*. This was the first of Hillerman's Navajo mysteries, starring Navajo police detective Joe Leaphorn, who would someday become the "legendary Leaphorn."

My cultural anthropology professor assigned it because like most American anthropologists he had a thing for the Navajo (an old Navajo joke is that a Navajo family consists of a grandmother, her daughters' families, and an anthropologist), and *The Blessing Way* not only included a lot of information about the Navajo, but made Navajo traditions an essential part of the plot: Leaphorn's ability to solve the central murder mystery in the book revolved around his ability to interpret Navajo beliefs and behavior.

I loved the book, though I did not end up majoring in anthropology, and over the next 25+ years, I read every one of Hillerman's Navajo mysteries. Usually I bought them in hardcover. I have always (until recently) been almost exclusively a SF & fantasy reader, with the occasional foray into mystery novels, but Hillerman remained one of my favorite authors, year after year. It wasn't so much the mysteries that enthralled me, but the way he wrote such believable and interesting Navajo characters. I became familiar with Shiprock, Tuba City, Window Rock, and the Four Corners region and the mesas and deserts and arroyos of the Southwest as if I had been there, though I've never done more than drive through the area. And of course, Joe Leaphorn and the growing cast of characters became like old friends.

Tony Hillerman was not himself a Native American. Nowadays, white authors writing other cultures frequently get themselves in trouble; even if they do their research and manage not to be offensive, cultural appropriation is still becoming quite a rankling issue. But Hillerman was named a Special Friend of the Dineh by the Navajo Tribe; he always wrote respectfully and with unimpeachable verisimilitude about his Navajo characters (and Hopi and Zuni and other tribes as well).

He also obscured locations in his books that were based on real places, to prevent people from looking for the sites he described. This wasn't an idle precaution - apparently tons of tourists really visit the Four Corners

area to see "Hillerman country," and the Navajo Tribal Police Station in Window Rock gets phone calls from people actually wanting to talk to Lieutenant Leaphorn or Sergeant Chee.

Joe Leaphorn is a practical man, college-educated, and while respectful of his Navajo roots, something of a skeptic. His wife Emma was a traditional Navajo, and he always took her wishes seriously, but Leaphorn himself saw superstition and some of the old tribal ways as hindrances and sources of trouble. As he said when asked whether he believed in witches, "I believe in people who believe in witches." Leaphorn would map out clues and do legwork (which was a *lot* of legwork across the entire Navajo Nation) and eventually his detective's instincts and Navajo intuition would solve the case, only occasionally with any guns being fired.

In the fourth book in the series, *People of Darkness*, Hillerman introduced Officer Jim Chee, a younger member of the Tribal Police who would become Leaphorn's colleague and partner and eventual friend, though not without some tension. Chee was a traditional Navajo, also college educated, but unlike Leaphorn, he truly believed in the Navajo Way, and spent much of the series studying to become a shaman and trying to reconcile that with also being a policeman. Leaphorn was not initially impressed by Chee's attempt to navigate these two often-contradictory paths, and did not think being a medicine man was compatible with being a cop. One of the most poignant points in the entire series was when Leaphorn, after a particularly grueling case, asked Chee to perform a Blessing Way ceremony for him, which was kind of like a lapsed Catholic asking a priest for confession. Leaphorn, the grizzled old lieutenant, was finally expressing his respect and friendship for the younger man.

Years go by. Leaphorn "retires" but never stays out of cases. Chee would eventually become Sergeant and then Lieutenant. Chee's romantic life would feature significantly in many of the books. When we first meet him, he is dating a white schoolteacher named Mary Landon, in a long-distance relationship that will last for several books. But Mary is never going to be happy living on the Rez with Chee, and Chee has no desire to go become her domesticated Indian husband. When that relationship ends, he begins dating Janet Pete, a half-white, half-Navajo lawyer. Beautiful, intelligent, and ambitious, she's a fine gal and Chee is very much in love with her. He even gets to proposing to her. But Janet wants Chee to join her in Washington, D.C., and even pulls strings to get him a slot in the FBI. The problem is, she's unwilling to accept that Chee doesn't *want* to give up his spartan, traditional life as a medicine man and Tribal Police officer. And Janet Pete is not a Reservation girl, will never be a Reservation girl.

The thirteenth book in the series, *The First Eagle*, introduces Officer Bernadette Manuelito of the Tribal Police, a Navajo cutie who is destined to be girlfriend #3 for Jim Chee, and really the point at which I thought the series began its decline. Not so much because of Bernadette, who is a perfectly fine character, and Hillerman, to his credit, always treats her (and other female characters) as equal characters who pull their weight in the story and aren't just damsels in distress, love interests, or appendages to the men, even if it is the male characters who occupy center stage most of the time.

But.

Long-running mystery series tend to accumulate cruft; after the first couple of books, they become increasingly less about the mystery *du jour* than the ongoing personal dramas of the characters. At first the regular reader enjoys this, wanting to catch up on how Jim Chee and his girlfriend are doing, or how Emma's health is nowadays, but sadly, too many authors begin to use these recurring tropes as shortcuts to reader investment, and Hillerman eventually fell prey to it himself. His last few books were, well, not really very good. This is not to say they were *bad* — still quite readable, but there was nothing new in them, the "mysteries" were lukewarm, the involvement of all the regulars often forced and tertiary. The setting was the same old setting and the Navajo elements were pro forma. Really, the stories in the last three books were pretty much just vehicles to move Chee and Manuelito along toward their eventual nuptials. I recall reading some time in the late 90s, I think, that Hillerman was done writing Leaphorn/Chee mysteries. Maybe like Sir

Arthur Conan Doyle, his fans wouldn't let him, or maybe he just loved his characters too much to let go of them after all.

Four of his books were made into movies, all available on Netflix. *The Dark Wind* starred Lou Diamond Phillips (Hollywood's "go-to" Indian actor) as Jim Chee.

A Thief of Time, *Skinwalkers*, and *Coyote Waits* were all PBS Mystery specials.

Anyway, at last we come to this book, the eighteenth and last book in the series. There won't be any more, because Hillerman died in 2008.

The Shape Shifter, to be fair, is better than the preceding two books, *The Sinister Pig* and *Skeleton Man*, which had me sadly shaking my head at just how much Hillerman the author was phoning it in. But *The Shape Shifter* tries very hard to force a bit of Navajo mythology into the story, mostly by allusion; the plot is about an ex-CIA man, a Hmong refugee, and a very old cold case that draws the "legendary lieutenant" (in the last half dozen or so books, this phrase will be repeated *constantly* in reference to "retired" Lieutenant Leaphorn) out of retirement just like he has been in the last few books. Chee and Manuelito barely figure into the plot at all; Hillerman has Leaphorn call Chee to ask him to do a little bit of legwork for him as an excuse to get the newlyweds peripherally involved. The "mystery" isn't really a mystery, at least not the sort where the author leaves clues to give the reader a chance to figure out what's going on before the climax.

It's enjoyable light reading, but would I honestly recommend *The Shape Shifter* to anyone who isn't a Hillerman fan? No. In itself, it is a 3-star book.

But. I've been reading Tony Hillerman for 27 years now. I've just finished the last book he ever wrote or ever will write. And there are not many other series where I can say I've read all 18 books, in sequence. Do I remember all the details of each one, after all these years? No, most of them kind of blur together. But Tony Hillerman, who was a decorated World War II vet, winner of many literary awards and a Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, and Special Friend of the Dineh, wrote books I've been a fan of over half my life. Someday, I may just start over with *The Blessing Way* and reread them all again.

So, although my head says *The Shape Shifter* should only get 3 stars, in my heart I am giving it a collective rating for all the hours I spent reading about Joe Leaphorn, Jim Chee, Janet Pete, Cowboy Dashee, Bernadette Manuelito, and many, many others, and traveled with them across the Four Corners. 5 stars, Mr. Hillerman.

Morris Graham says

Before we start, I am a Hillerman fan. This was Tony Hillerman's last novel. He died at age 84, two years after this novel was done. A correspondent of his said that Hillerman reported he was 84, but felt 104. Another reported that his handwriting indicated he was ill. This book is not the quality of Hillerman's works. It is my opinion that he either started this, but felt too ill to do it right, or he started this and was unable to complete it and it was finished by a ghost writer. The author overuses the term legendary-lieutenant, as if

everyone in the world knows him and that is the first word that comes to mind when describing Joe Leaphorn, even total strangers. There are some logic issues, as to why an international criminal with lots of money would take a job at an obscure trading post on the the reservation with a low cash flow just to kill someone over a few thousand dollars and a rug. Hillerman's love to tell a historical story came through with the tale-tellers rug history. This had editing issues that were not cleaned up by the publisher. Whether or not Tony wrote this novel all by himself or it was completed by a ghost writer, we may never know. I prefer to remember the solid works like "The Thief of Time," "Sinister Pig," and "Coyote Waits" when I remember Tony Hillerman. He was a great writer. The answer may be in the fact that Anne Hillerman, Tony's daughter, wrote her own Chee-Leaphorn novel under her own name "Spider Woman's Daughter," debuted in 2013. I would not be terribly surprised if "Shape Shifter" was really a coloboration with her aging father or maybe even ghost written under his name by her before she honed her writing craft.

Alex Bledsoe says

I blasted through a bunch of the Leaphorn and Chee novels in the late eighties and early nineties, then they kind of fell off my radar due to the issues that usually creep into long-running series, especially those set in such a particular place. I picked up this one on a whim, not realizing it was actually the final one Hillerman wrote. It definitely has the air of an elegy about it: Joe Leaphorn, retired and just plain tired, gets drawn into an old case that never sat quite right with him. There's no mystery to speak of: you'll spot the villain in his first scene, and you'll see every plot twist coming. Leaphorn's quest is lackadaisical, never really picking up steam, and while that might be appropriate for a story about an old man, it's kind of death to a mystery. Your enjoyment will hinge on how much you like reading page after page of Leaphorn's late-in-life musings.

Richard says

The Shape Shifter by Tony Hillerman

I've been a fan of Tony Hillerman's stories for over a decade. He's written a lot of entertaining yarns, but the titles have a similarity that makes it a challenge for me to remember which one was the first I read. Each one centers on a primary mystery, but there's also a subplot about a smaller case that eventually ties in, one way or another, with the main adventure. Throughout the novels the main characters, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Officer (rank dependent on the book) Jim Chee, change and grow, but not enough to require reading them in order. I never stopped to count them, but I've likely read at least half of them, and they're all consistently good.

However, while reading The Shape Shifter I learned there are eighteen novels in the series, and sadly this one was Hillerman's last, before his death in 2008, at age 83. It was published two years before he passed. Knowing it was his last, cast an elusive note of melancholy over the reading.

The story has the legendary Lieutenant Leaphorn, newly retired, drawn into a new mystery involving a case considered solved long ago, and to which he originally had only a minor connection. An ornate Navajo rug, known as the tale-teller, woven in secret, with signs of the trickster coyote, witchcraft and symbols of greed, the ultimate evil in the Dineh value system, was burned. Thought destroyed in the Totter's Trading Post fire that burnt the place to the ground, along with the life of its caretaker. But new evidence surfaces, casting doubts about the rug's destruction. Hillerman unfolds his yarn at a comfortable pace. His style exudes warmth and respect for his characters and their ways. He builds the tension slowly and masterfully over the

first third of this book.

Part of the charm of the series, besides the mystery at hand, is Hillerman's exploration of Native American cultures. He touches on several, but his main focus is usually Navajo. No surprise since his main characters are officers of the Navajo Tribal Police. What's unique about this novel is that he introduces a new character, a servant (or more accurately, a slave), Tommy Vang, who is Hmong, an ethnic group spread across parts of Asia, without a country of their own.

The action slows in the middle as Hillerman compares cultures through the conversations between Leaphorn and Vang as they drive across the sparsely populated territories of New Mexico and surrounding areas. It's a digression from the narrative drive, but an interesting diversion on how culture guides motivation, decision-making and ultimately behavior. Both the Navajo and the Hmong received horrendous treatment from more powerful forces who took their lands and pushed them into harsh environments, leaving their survival in peril. Only their strong cultural roots and beliefs allowed them to move on and forward, instead of living in the past, harboring hatred and forever nurturing old wounds.

The story concludes with a satisfying climax as the threads are finally woven together on the main case and its ancillaries. During the tale, Leaphorn confers with several of his contemporaries, who are also struggling with how to fill their days in retirement. Their dialogue paints one picture, their actions another. Certainly Hillerman himself had figured out long ago that pursuit on an interest is perhaps the best medicine.

Hillerman's daughter, Anne, published her first novel in 2013, *Spider Woman's Daughter*. It continues the adventures of her father's famous detectives and became a NYT bestseller its first week on sale.

Links:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tony_hillerman

<http://www.umsl.edu/~smueller/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hmong_people

<http://www.anehillerman.com>
