



## Skeleton Man

*Tony Hillerman*

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## **Skeleton Man** Tony Hillerman

*In 1956, an airplane crash left the remains of 172 passengers scattered among the majestic cliffs of the Grand Canyon - including an arm attached to a briefcase containing a fortune in gems. Half a century later, one of the missing diamonds has reappeared... and the wolves are on the scent.*

Former Navajo Tribal Police Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn is coming out of retirement to help exonerate a slow, simple kid accused of robbing a trade post. Billy Tuve claims he received the diamond he tried to pawn from a mysterious old man in the canyon, and his story has attracted the dangerous attention of strangers to the Navajo lands - one more interested in a severed limb than the fortune it was attached to; another willing to murder to keep lost secrets hidden. But nature herself may prove the deadliest adversary, as Leaphorn and Sergeant Jim Chee follow a puzzle - and a killer - down into the dark realm of Skeleton Man.

## **Skeleton Man Details**

Date : Published January 31st 2006 by HarperTorch (first published November 2004)

ISBN : 9780060563462

Author : Tony Hillerman

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# From Reader Review *Skeleton Man* for online ebook

## Joyce says

This was a selection of the month from my local book group. While I enjoyed it, I have read many of Tony Hillerman's books and would consider this one very average. Joe Leaphorn, a primary character in earlier books is now retired, but makes a cameo/walk-on appearance in this book, playing no significant part in advancing the plot.

The plot revolves around a true-life plane crash over the Grand Canyon. The crash, which resulted in two planes and all passengers falling from the sky, happened in 1956. All other events in the book - the diamond courier, the hermit in the canyon, the inclusion of the crash in local Native legends and myths - are fictional. Joanna Craig, the woman in search of her presumed father's bones (he was the diamond courier) moves the action along, but was not a particularly sympathetic character. As a result, I didn't care whether she was successful in her quest and really only read the book in order to enjoy Hillerman's love of the area and its people.

If you haven't read any of Hillerman's "Navajo" books, this is not a good starting point. Go to your local library or bookstore and find the earlier books. You'll really enjoy learning about Navajo and Hopi customs and you'll want to travel to the region. Leaphorn is a marvelous fictional character, but of course he eventually does have to retire. Sadly, that seems to have weakened the series.

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## Diane says

I enjoy the adventures of Jim, Bernie, and the legendary lieutenant Leaphorn. This is another good one. Hillerman takes you there in his well-written stories.

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## David says

Tony Hillerman used to be one of my favorite authors, but he did that thing a lot of authors do with long-running series: said he was done writing Leaphorn/Chee mysteries, but then kept writing them. After the stinker that was *The Sinister Pig*, I was almost afraid to read *Skeleton Man*, since it's the next to last book Hillerman wrote before he died, and I'd rather remember Hillerman in his glory days, when Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee were still fresh and sharp and coming at their Navajo ways from two different viewpoints: Leaphorn the veteran, the pragmatic realist who has no patience for superstitions, and Chee the rookie, the traditional Navajo who wants to be a cop and a medicine man.

*Skeleton Man* was better than *The Sinister Pig*, but it brought nothing new to the series or the characters. I mean, it also does what all long-running detective series do and start to become as much about the characters' personal lives as whatever case they are working on this book. Chee is now engaged to Bernadette Manuelito, who was first introduced several books ago as a love interest for Chee, who has been notoriously unlucky in love since he first appeared way back in the early books to share the spotlight with Leaphorn. But that's about all this book is: an update on Bernie and Chee.

The actual plot involves a plane crash fifty years ago that left a suitcase full of diamonds handcuffed to a dead man's wrist at the bottom of a canyon in the reservation. Now, fifty years later, someone wants those diamonds, and the dead man's daughter wants his arm so she can use DNA testing to prove he was her father. We get a repeat of the previous book in that basically you've got a rich villain sending a hired thug to do his dirty work, so it's another white dude showing up to cause trouble.

The entire story is framed as Joe Leaphorn ("the legendary Leaphorn" as he is referred to umpteen times) telling the story to his old fart buddies around coffee - this is the pretext to even get him involved in the book at all. There is a little bit of interaction with some Hopi Indians (hence the double-meaning of the title; there is a *very* loose connection to a Hopi myth), and the climax is resolved by an act of nature.

This is really just a short story that Hillerman padded out to (barely) novel length.

I can only recommend *Skeleton Man* for true Hillerman fans who just want to finish the series. There won't be any more Chee/Leaphorn novels, after all. But the earlier books in the series are well worth reading; start with *The Blessing Way*.

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## **Carol says**

Second Read: This is an especially good book. A really good book club book too. This was a selection of the month from a book group. While I enjoyed it, I have read many of Tony Hillerman's books and would consider this one very average. Joe Leaphorn, a primary character in earlier books is now retired, but makes a cameo/walk-on appearance in this book, playing no significant part in advancing the plot.

The plot revolves around a true-life plane crash over the Grand Canyon. The crash, which resulted in two planes and all passengers falling from the sky, happened in 1956. All other events in the book - the diamond courier, the hermit in the canyon, the inclusion of the crash in local Native legends and myths - are fictional. Joanna Craig, the woman in search of her presumed father's bones (he was the diamond courier) moves the action along, but was not a particularly sympathetic character. As a result, I didn't care whether she was successful in her quest and really only read the book in order to enjoy Hillerman's love of the area and its people.

If you haven't read any of Hillerman's "Navajo" books, this is not a good starting point. Go to your local library or bookstore and find the earlier books. You'll really enjoy learning about Navajo and Hopi customs and you'll want to travel to the region. Leaphorn is a marvelous fictional character, but of course he eventually does have to retire. Sadly, that seems to have weakened the series

First Read: It's one the best Tony Hillerman I've ever read before. This book has very little to do with the Indian Lore and traditions that a lot of the other Hillerman books have, and it moved right along without a hitch. Not too many characters either, of course except Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. But the other characters were interesting and it was a well thought out mystery, who dunnit kind of thing. And at 240 pages it was just right. Highly Recommend.

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## **Susan says**

I found the set up for this mystery slow going. However, by the second half of the book the pace picked up. The final confrontation was really very good. So, for the most part, an enjoyable read. Not enough Leaphorn in the story, though.

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### **Carol. says**

A little too modern for me. Involves a trip to Los Angeles and a shantytown development. Needless and uncharacteristic time is spent on antagonist development, including a horrific scene where he breaks into a mansion and leaves a macabre scene behind. I missed the Hillerman gentleness of earlier mysteries; the focus on our protagonists and the development of their lives, the sharing of different southwest Native American cultures, the drawing of the southwest landscape.

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### **Susan says**

Interesting idea but honestly so short that with some editing it could almost have been a short story. Just winding down the series with the old retired Navajo police Lt Joe Leaphorn now marginally involved in the goings-on, and mostly by phone.

This could have been so much more but perhaps readers of this series of books aren't interested in having a fine portrait painted of character and locale nor details of landscape. Perhaps they've read it all before. Standing on its own without the background of other Hillerman books with these characters and set in Arizona however it's disappointing.

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### **Susan Johnson says**

I love Tony Hillerman and his books set in the 4 corners of America- New Mexico, Arizona etc. I had read them all about 25 years ago and so I thought enough time had elapsed to listen to the audio on the way to my grandkids.

As it was going along I realized the character, Bernie, was really irritating me. First of all, I dislike women who do stupid things to prove to a man that she is just as good as he is. Please. Then as I was gritting my teeth, I realized it was the voice the narrator gave her. It was whiny and nails on the chalkboard sounding. It ruined the story completely for me. Her voice sounded nothing like it did in my head.

The power of the written word.

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### **Peter Derk says**

The following elements are involved in this book: a severed limb, a diamond heist, a mid-air collision between two airplanes, and a mummified corpse.

Wouldn't you think at least ONE of those would be exciting on some level?

If you're human, you would. And Mr. Hillerman would owe you an apology. Probably even an apology involving baked goods. An apolo-cake. An aPielogy. At least that way you would walk away with SOMETHING.

There were two female characters in this book that I didn't even realize were separate characters until about halfway through. This is not a good thing. If you're on a date with someone and only halfway through do you realize that the person you picked up earlier in the evening is not the person you are currently sharing movie popcorn with, I would question how well the date was going. You should immediately end this date. And probably make some hospital appointments.

Maybe it's me, maybe it's my natural distaste for mysteries. It's not that I've read a lot of them, but the idea of surprise, in general, is very unappealing to me. I don't care about surprise parties, I don't care if I know what I'm eating for dinner, and I always snooped around the house and found my Christmas gifts early. Which is a really good thing because sometimes your mom gets you a guitar, and sometimes you see it and say, "Oh shit!" because you asked for a guitar months ago, but now you REALLY don't want a guitar because you know you're going to suck at it. So thank god you looked around in her bedroom before Christmas morning because at least now you can put on a brave face.

Mystery and surprise are overrated, in my opinion. And some of the best things in life don't have mystery in them. I like pizza. I know I like pizza. No mystery there, yet time and again I order pizza. Sex. There can be some level of mystery there, but rarely is there a twist ending, and usually when there is someone is really unhappy about it and spends the evening with an ice pack.

The other problem is that I'm supposed to discuss this with a book club tomorrow. What the hell am I going to say? I have a couple potential ideas:

"Hey, wasn't that a neat book?"

"I didn't think that book was so neat? What about you?"

"That cover sure is neat."

I really can't think of one good reason to read this book. I mean, come on. A severed arm! And nothing!? If you can't make something happen with a severed arm, you have no business on my bookshelves

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## **Nancy says**

The only thing going for this novel was that Chee and Bernie finally get together and plan to marry. Bernie loves Chee for who he is, and them planning for their married future on the reservation was enduring. There was a villain with a wealth fetish, and the descriptions of his elaborate meals made me want to slap him. The appealing Cowboy Dashee helped solve the crime along with the "legendary" Leaphorn. At this stage, this series is just limping to the finish line.

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## **Drew says**

Easy, enjoyable read--especially as a change from more serious reads.

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## Amy says

CD/unabridged: Book 17 of the Joe Leaphorn & Jimmy Chee series. I've listened to two other books by Hillerman and he is a very good story teller. This one was written about four years before Hillerman's passing and is short. I was surprised to see that it was unabridged and only six discs.

In this one Leaphorn, retired, recounts the story of an airplane that crashed in to another and fell to the Grand Canyon while trying to prove the innocence of a simple man. I like it because I learned something; most of it doing with Indian culture. In a flashback, you learn the story of how Chee and Bernie went into the GC to find the diamonds and the wrist. The ending was a little fulfilling. I've read several novels that have a "male rain" that wipes out everything. (Another one, just this year.) It was an easy out and shortened the storytelling.

George Guidall does a great reading with a lot of flavor of the west.

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## Carmen says

*She peered at her desk calendar, looked up again at the once-legendary lieutenant, and said, "And you are...?"*

*A knife-to-the-heart question when delivered in a building where one has worked most of one's adult life, given orders, hired people, and become modestly famous for a mile or two in every direction.*

You know one thing that I really enjoy about Hillerman's books? He is a fan of happy endings. The book usually works out pretty amazing, with the good guys being rewarded and the bad guys being punished. I really like that.

Bernie and Chee are making plans to (view spoiler) When Cowboy's mentally disabled cousin Billy tries to pawn a \$20,000 diamond for \$20, he lands in jail accused with theft and possible murder. Cowboy enlists Chee's help to get his cousin out of jail.

But before the men can bail Billy out, he's freed by a rich white woman who is on a quest. A quest to find the source of the diamond that Billy claimed to have gotten from a certain Skeleton Man? No, she wants to find the severed arm of her father - the only thing that can prove her relation to him and help her gain his vast inheritance.

With an evil lawyer out to stop her from getting her father's money, some hired killers, some other greedy people after the diamonds - Bernie, Chee and Cowboy find they've landed in some hot water.

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It's hard for me to understand people who are obsessed with diamonds. I have zero interest in diamonds, ZERO. It's kind of weird to read about all these people scouring the canyons and killing each other over some diamonds. \*shaking my head\*

I also don't understand Chandler, the hired killer. He's obsessed with luxury.

*Plymale sighed, took a sip from whatever he was drinking. Something iced. Slightly green. Certainly too expensive to be Chandler's normal beverage these days. He loved the taste of such luxury on his tongue.*

He's constantly fantasizing about rich foods, rich drinks, "expensive women"... and I just don't get it. I like being comfortable - I definitely don't like living hand-to-mouth and I have intimate experience with not having enough to eat and not knowing where your next meal's coming from if you're even lucky enough to have a next meal coming - but at the same time I don't crave being rich. Middle class (actual middle class, not upper middle class OC lawyer doctor shit) is about the height of my aspirations. Being able to feed yourself and your family, pay the rent on an apartment every month, maybe have a car if you live far enough away from the city to need one.

But this whole fetishizing of wealth is extremely weird to me. I see magazines and tv shows where it's seen as glamorous to be ostentatiously wealthy. And I have to say I don't feel the need to have all that stuff. Five cars, a heated pool, servants, your kids all have BMWs and Coach purses, more space in a huge house than one knows what to do with... And when I see and deal with rich people in real life (which is quite frequently) they never seem to know what to do with their money. They're always renovating. Renovating, rebuilding, renovating, etc. etc. If I were a rich woman, it would be education and travel all the way. So much school, so much traveling. I have no idea why you have to renovate your already beautiful house six times. o.O I have no idea why you are determined to renovate your house six times but "can't afford" to pay your employees a living wage or tip your waitress a decent 20% tip.

Hillerman is in himself very conflicted on this. He reminds me of James Bond.

### **What?**

Yeah. Tony Hillerman reminds me of James Bond. James Bond was conflicted and fucked-up when it came to wealth. James Bond loved nice things: expensive cars, expensive alcohol, expensive cigarettes, "expensive" women, and expensive clothes. But on the other hand, James Bond sneered at and hated the wealthy. He saw them as soft and stupid. Some of Ian Fleming's books were very interesting studies on this subject, especially perhaps *For Your Eyes Only*.

Hillerman celebrates the poor. I like his books because his heroes are living just above poverty level, in trailers, on the Reservation. No one can afford cell phones. Those who can afford a car, drive beat-up cars. They live on cheap fried food and instant coffee.

Hillerman paints this lifestyle as very noble and good and unselfish and "right" unlike the "greedy white men" who enjoy luxurious things like running water. Not joking, Chee and Bernie are going to be (view spoiler) living in a trailer. With no running water and no flushing toilets. However, can I just point out that these books made Hillerman an extremely rich man. HE certainly wasn't living "close to nature" in a trailer with no flushing toilet. "Let's glamorize the lives of the poor, but dine on steak every night" seems to be a VERY common attitude I find in people. Living in poverty isn't "glamorous" or "noble" or "close to nature" or whatever Hillerman is trying to say here. Living in poverty fucking sucks, there's nothing romantic about it. And that's all I have to say about THAT.

Tl;dr - A solid mystery and a rather fun entry in Hillerman's Navajo Mystery series.

\*Not trying to slam Hillerman, 1.) I know fuck-all about him as a person and 2.) He's dead. But it grates my



cheese when well-off people write these kind of "poor people are the salt of the earth" novels. Fuck that shit. Have you ever eaten food out of a dumpster? Because you HAD to, not because you are rich and decided it would be fun to be a freegan? Don't ever try to tell me that poverty is some kind of noble, romantic thing. It's shit.

On the other hand, I'm a hypocrite. I love reading books about poor people, I love when the heroes of the book are not rich people and are people who appreciate the joys in the little things like being able to afford a meal out or saving up to go to a film. I love reading about characters I can relate to, like Louisa in *Me Before You*. So please take my ranting with a grain of salt. But then again, in *Me Before You*, I don't think they were glamorizing the life Louisa was living with her family and her shit jobs.

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### **Chris says**

After I started listening to this, I discovered I've already listened to it - perhaps on one of my earlier trips cross country? Anyways, it's a good one, with the usual skipping between points-of-view. I've been watching the series (Netflix? Amazon Prime?) and Leaphorn is depicted a bit differently (now that my memory has been refreshed) with the book. It was fun to re-listen. Great reader, too...George Guidall.

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### **Judith says**

I'm rereading the Tony Hillerman series about the southwest and Navajo nation. His characters demonstrate a deep and clear understanding of the people and the land. I recommend them all.

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### **Toni Osborne says**

This mystery is straightforward and pretty much predictable. I found the author kept repeating himself each time he introduced a new character and after hearing the story of the diamonds three or four times it takes a toll. This is the first novel I have read by this author and I was totally disappointed with it.

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### **Bob says**

Whether you like a book or not depends on why you read it. I've always loved Tony Hillerman's descriptions of the Southwest, and accordingly I have an unfulfilled desire to go there someday. His descriptions of the people and the characters are intriguing and the steady evolution of Jim Chee's relationships and Joe Leaphorn's retirement are satisfying.

Having said all that I got really stuck on some elements of the plot. I loved his descriptions of the Grand Canyon, but I've been there. The Grand Canyon is a hot dangerous and scary place without the proper preparation. The idea of people from that part of the country hiking into Grand Canyon in street shoes and carrying part of a bottle of water is just ludicrous, unless they are hoping to star in a search and rescue operation. Likewise all the characters hiking by themselves into side canyons. And after fifty years having several people just happen to find a needle in a haystack, the one cave that contains all the secrets they are

looking for, based on twenty year old tales and rumors.

The narrative is enjoyable, but just enjoy the descriptions and don't get too hung up on the plot being believable.

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### **Polo says**

I enjoy the humor, Navaho lore and mystery surrounding life on the Navaho Nation in Tony Hillerman's Leaphorn, Chee and Manuelito books. This was another entertaining and enjoyable read.

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### **Bill Donhiser says**

Another fine Hillerman Novel. An airplane crash, a cheated heiress, and a crooked lawyer. This creates a good plot for a good Navajo Mystery

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### **Shannon says**

I love that this is told as a story from the past - Lt. Leaphorn tells the story of how a woman came from New York to try to find a bone from her father killed in a major airliner crash. This would give her sole inheritance to a large business empire but those that have control now try to stop her. Plus there are diamonds involved...lots of diamonds. Needless to say, Bernie and Jim Chee are almost peripheral to the story but they end up married and helping the woman claim her birthright. There's one more written by Hillerman and now his daughter is resuming the series so it will be interesting to see where the characters and storylines go.

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