

By AL STOTTS

"High entertainment"

*"Warmhearted
and good-humored"*

*"Celebration
of a tradition"*

*"Deep respect
for a people"*

*"Major contribution
to literary history"*



Tony Hillerman

These are some of the accolades that have been printed in recent months about books written by University of New Mexico authors. Although New Mexico's fertile literary soil has been acclaimed nationwide in the media, the literary output of the state's largest school—UNM—is equally impressive, but perhaps less often noticed.

Within the past year three UNM authors have been featured in the Book of the Month Club News. A fourth has sold a television option for his first novel and a fifth has published a widely acclaimed critical study of American humor.

Hillerman, Harris, Silko, Anaya and Hill are all familiar names in UNM classrooms and they are also becoming familiar names throughout the nation because of books like *Listening Woman*, *Potomac Fever*, *Ceremony*, *Bless Me*, *Ultima* and *America's Humor from Poor Richard to Donnesbury*.

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Journalism Professor Tony Hillerman's newest book, *Listening Woman*, a Book of the Month Club alternate, is being hailed as perhaps the best of his four books and a contender for top mystery of the year. His *Dance Hall of the Dead* was an Edgar award winner several years ago. This time Hillerman's Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police is called on to solve the murder of a harmless old man. In the process he encounters other crimes, like the kidnapping of a group of Boy Scouts, and risks his life over the discovery of an ancient tribal secret.

Like *The Blessing Way* and *Dance Hall of the Dead*, *Listening Woman* is rich with Navajo lore. For example, as Margaret Cigaret, who is also called *Listening Woman*, prepares a chant she says to young Anna Atcitty:

"You pay attention now, daughter of my sister. We're going to bless this man with this pollen. You remember how we do that?"

"You sing the song of the Talking God," Anna says. "The one about Born of Water and the Monster Slayer."

Listening Woman then sprinkles the pollen carefully over the old man. A "listening woman," by the way, is a dispenser of herbs and charms for healing.

"In my books I want to give the American reader a look at Indians without all the mythology that has developed around them," Hillerman says. "I want to give readers a look at real human beings."

He says he has found only one Navajo who didn't like his books. This critic argued that Leaphorn is not a Navajo name. "But generally the reaction among Navajos has been very favorable," Hillerman says. "My books are widely used in Indian schools. I think they can see what I'm trying to do."

Hillerman is now working on another mystery, tentatively titled *People of Darkness*. "Right now," he says, "the book involves the fifth floor of Bernalillo County Medical Center where one man is trying desperately to kill another man at 4:30 in the morning."

Hillerman, also an assistant to UNM President William E. Davis, would like some day to write the "standard American novel" about a person moving from adolescence to adulthood and the end of innocence.

"But I'll have to wait until I have some

time to do it right," he says. "Some day I'll write fulltime, but right now I'm really stuck on this university. I work with some fine people at UNM. Exciting things are going to happen here so I just don't think about leaving."



Fred Harris

Political Science Professor Fred Harris achieved fame in politics long before he came to UNM, but he is also a prolific writer, with four popular books about his political philosophy and experiences. He is working on a government textbook now and may collaborate later with his wife and daughter on a book about Indians and government.

Last September Harris's *Potomac Fever*, a light-hearted account of his years in the U.S. Senate and his 1976 presidential campaign, was featured along with English Professor Leslie Silko's novel *Ceremony in the Book of the Month Club News*. "Potomac fever is not exactly a social disease," he writes.

It is a highly contagious affliction of the human mind. Many people have been known to catch it. I did on my first visit to Washington, D.C., and I probably still have a touch of it, although I think at last I have it under control.

Teaching and writing about politics seem to have grown on Harris. He started at UNM as a visiting professor and has now accepted a permanent position as a full professor.

"I loved being in Washington," he says, "but I wouldn't want to go back to it. My wife and I have always been lucky enough to change what we do from time to time. I really enjoy being out of politics. Lord, I was in it for a long time."

The textbook Harris is writing now, *Participation: the Ideal and the Reality of Democracy in America*, will be published in the fall of 1979 by Scott-Foreman, a major publisher of texts. Harris says a chapter of the book deals specifically with Indian tribes as local government units. Most texts have been sensitized to women and blacks, he says, but they still neglect Hispanics and Indians.

His wife LaDonna, a Comanche Indian, heads Americans for Indian Opportunity, an Albuquerque-based national organization. His daughter, Kathryn Harris Tijerina, is a counsel to the Senate's Select Committee on Indian Affairs. Together they may write a book

on Indians and government for the University of New Mexico Press.

"I developed a course at UNM on native Americans and government and I found out there isn't a single book that covers the topic adequately," Harris says.

The Oklahoma native thinks he is becoming a better teacher every year. In addition to the course on Indians he teaches about political parties and elections, Congress and the legislative process, an introductory American government course and "new populist studies."

"Teaching and writing make me much more informed on the research and theoretical approaches to these studies," he says. "I think writing the government text has improved my teaching."

Leslie Marmon Silko's first novel, *Ceremony*, has received widespread critical acclaim since its publication last year. The story of a Laguna soldier who returns to the pueblo after enduring a World War II prison camp, the book has been called a celebration of the ancient Indian oral tradition of story-telling.

"You don't have anything if you don't have the stories," the book begins in verse.

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]

They aren't just entertainment.

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.

So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that

They would be happy

Because we would be defenseless then.

He rubbed his belly.

I keep them here

[he said]

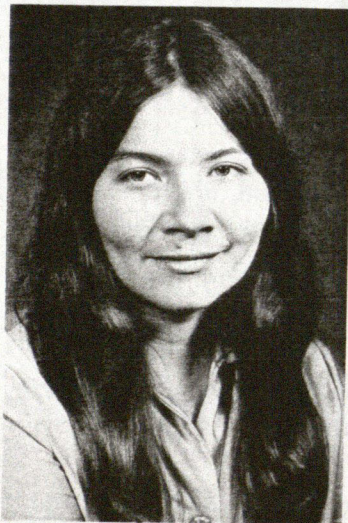
Here, put your hand on it

See, it is moving.

There is life here

for the people.

And in the belly of this story
the rituals and the ceremony
are still growing.



Leslie Marmon Silko

Silko, now an assistant professor of English, was born in Albuquerque of mixed ancestry—Laguna, Mexican and American—and grew up in the pueblo. This spring she has been on sabbatical leave in Arizona working on scripts and production schedules for a series of four half-hour films of traditional Laguna Pueblo stories intended for use on public television and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The stories will be filmed at the pueblo beginning next year, with pueblo residents assisting the television crew. The programs will present Laguna creation stories, witchcraft tales, coyote stories and "Yellow Woman" stories.

"Recently while giving a guest lecture at the Columbia University writing division," Silko says, "I was asked by the director of the writing division if I had any Laguna Pueblo translations to offer for publication in the university's translation center publication. I told him that I was not satisfied with translations of Laguna narratives because English words as gray print on a page distort and greatly over-simplify Laguna oral literature."

Telling the stories on the sound track of color film shot on location will provide a more complete and valid translation than print could, she says.

"The footage accompanying this 'telling' will consist of the particular places designated by the tellers and filmed at the times of day and during the seasons in which the stories are set," Silko says. "In this way the rich and provocative dimensions of the story-telling art at Laguna Pueblo will be better understood and appreciated by the wider American audience."

English Professor Rudolfo Anaya, author of *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Heart of Aztlan*, is also involved with television. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) has purchased an option on the rights to *Bless Me, Ultima* with the intent of making a 90-minute pilot film and perhaps a series of six later shows.

Bless Me, Ultima, which also has been adapted for the stage by a Los Angeles theater company, is the story of a young Chicano's passage into manhood in New Mexico. It has been called the most

perceptive literary presentation of the collective Chicano experience.

Anaya says PBS has hired an independent Los Angeles producer and writer for the pilot. "It takes time to orient yourself to script writing and I just don't have the time to do it right now," he says.

Filming of the pilot should begin this fall in New Mexico. Anaya says the producer is looking for a small village and a bridge as locations. In the book the main character, young Antonio, describes the significance of the bridge which links his small adobe house with the nearby town:

I had been afraid of the awful presence of the river, which was the soul of the river, but through Ultima I learned that my spirit shared in the spirit of things. But the innocence which our isolation sheltered could not last forever, and the affairs of the town began to reach across our bridge and enter my life.

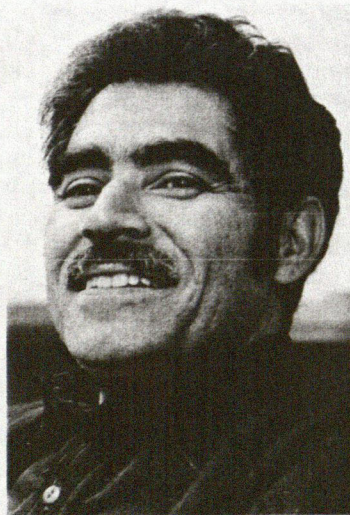
"If anyone wants to put up their village and bridge for the film," Anaya says, "they should contact me. But I don't know if most people in New Mexico would want these Hollywood characters to come in and tear up their place." In fact, Anaya's attitude about the film is almost casual, perhaps a little suspicious.

"I have had reservations about television," he admits. "The Hollywood machine will do what it wants in the end. In my case I'm working with a Chicano producer, so that should help retain the flavor and cultural setting of the story. I'm happy with that."

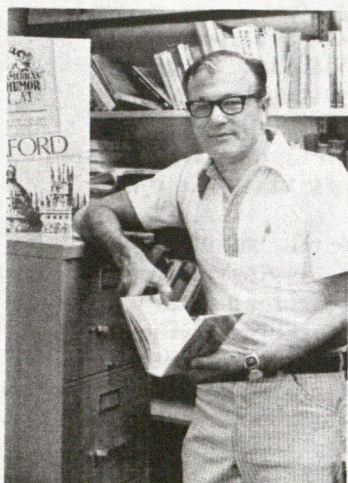
"It's interesting that PBS rather than one of the commercial networks wants to do the pilot," he adds. "The others probably would want to put a sex angle on it."

Anaya has just finished a manuscript for a new book titled *Tortuga* which will complete the trilogy of *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Heart of Aztlan*. "Themes from the first two books are involved in *Tortuga*," he says. "Readers of *Aztlan* will especially understand some of the themes I'm talking about."

Hamlin Hill is also an English professor at UNM. Although he has never written a novel, he is a widely known



Rudolfo Anaya



Hamlin Hill

expert on Mark Twain in particular and American humor in general. With his University of Chicago mentor, Walter Blair, Hill has written a new book, *America's Humor from Poor Richard to Donnesbury*.

While most critical studies of humor tend to be deadpan and decidedly non-humorous, reviewers are giving Hill and Blair high marks for approaching their subject with creativity. Author Studs Terkel says the book is "an easygoing though enlightening history of American laughter by two easygoing, enlightened observers. It is a delight to read."

A colleague, Henry Nash Smith of the University of California at Berkeley, says the book is a landmark in the scholarship and criticism of American literature. "They have produced that anomaly, a big book resting on encyclopedic knowledge," Smith says, "which manages at the same time to preserve a lightness of touch that Mark Twain and E. B. White would admire."

The book is being given a big promotional campaign by its publisher, Oxford Press, in an effort to reach an audience larger than the academic community which normally is the target of such critical studies.

"We were commissioned to do the book in a light-hearted style," Hill says. "It's a platypus, a semi-academic book." Hill and Blair liken the evolution of America's national humor to

"a huge amorphous glob in a horror movie, relentlessly coming from the Old World to the New, swept along by explorers, invaders, curious visitors, travel book writers, settlers, governors, actors, merchants, slaves and journalists. Like matter, the stuff is indestructible. But as it rolls along, it usually changes.

Hill says the book attempts to show that there is essentially nothing unique about American humor as distinguished from European humor and that there is nothing new about contemporary national humor as opposed to historic U.S. humor.

"All of Garry Trudeau's *Donnesbury* characters are losers," Hill says, "which goes back to Mark Twain making fun of himself. Trudeau didn't invent the humor of the 'born loser' or political satire. Or consider the great film comedian W. C. Fields: he's just a modern Falstaff."

There are some near-unique qualities about American humor, Hill admits. But he says they are geographic qualities and matters of emphasis. "Insiders in a regional culture have always hoaxed outsiders," he says, and "old-timers always play jokes on newcomers. That's ancient. New Mexico's comic antagonism toward Texans isn't really new either."

Hill, who teaches a popular UNM course on American humor, says he has never attempted to write humor. "Maybe Bernard Shaw was right," he adds. "Those who can, do, and those who can't, teach. I don't think I'll ever attempt to write humor."

He says recent changes in American humor are especially fascinating to watch because of humor's rapid evolution since World War II.

"It's obviously undergoing changes with regard to 'sick humor' and 'black humor' and fabulous science fiction humor. The mass media are now willing to tolerate all kinds of humor that were unthinkable years ago with programs like 'Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman' and 'Soap'."

Off-color jokes have always been part of the humor repertoire, he says, "but now they have come into the living room. I remember a post-World War II movie in which Audrey Hepburn used words like 'virgin' and 'abortion'. That movie was condemned and banned in some areas of the country."

Woody Allen is probably the best professional humorist in America today, Hill believes. "Allen is in the tradition of James Thurber and Robert Benchley and the other 'perfect neurotics' who have written humor for the *New Yorker* magazine," he adds.

Hill says in the future he may put together an anthology of American humor which would parallel the new critical study.

(The five people discussed here are only part of the University's stable of thinkers, researchers and writers. In terms ranging from poetry to Fortran, UNM people are expressing their ideas on a vast array of academic and popular topics. Samples of many of their works may be found at the UNM Press and the UNM Bookstore.) ■