



Anne Hillerman

continuing the journey
of Leaphorn and Chee

A PHOTOGRAPH OF WHAT seems to be an angry mushroom cloud bursting from the smooth ripples of a Southwestern desert landscape hangs in the living room of Anne Hillerman's Santa Fe home.

She hurriedly escorts her enthusiastic dog into another part of the adobe house, which has a distinct New Mexico feel: the Great Seal of New Mexico adorns the entryway. Perhaps the bomb picture is also a nod to our state's history?

On her deck, surrounded by juniper forest and the tinkling of wind chimes, Hillerman relaxes and begins to tell the story of her stories with: "It's complicated." Anne has a knack for making the complicated simple. Like her father, Tony Hillerman, she was a journalist before she was a novelist.

"Being a journalist taught me efficiency," she says. "To make things as good as you can make them, but to realize that part of being human is that it is not going to be perfect."

Managing expectations comes with the territory when carrying on the legacy of a beloved author. In 2013 Anne published *Spider Woman's Daughter*, the first installment in the continuation of her father's wildly successful Leaphorn and Chee series. She admits being terrified of getting something wrong.

"It made my blood run cold. There are readers out there who know every nuance. I thought, people are going to see the front of this book with the 'Hillerman' part and then see this 'Anne' word in front and they're going to think, 'What's happened to the books I love?'"

The mystery novel focusing on Bernie Manuelito debuted on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, and she followed it with two more installments in the series. Anne recalls that prior to Tony's death in 2008, she had suggested to her father that he make Bernie a stronger character.

"He gave me that little smile dads give daughters, and said, 'Oh honey, that's such a good idea.' But I knew he would never do it. When he died, I thought I should see if I could write a novel where Bernie would be not just the pretty girlfriend but a full-fledged crime solver."

Anne relied on the advice of the same person her father had leaned on for support: her mother.

"My mom was always Dad's first editor. He would not have been the writer he was without her. He often said he didn't think he did a good job writing about female characters. I think the best writing he did about a woman character was about Joe Leaphorn's wife, Emma, and Dad writes best about her only after she's dead. When Leaphorn is remembering her and talking about how much he loved her, you could just feel how much he misses her. Writing about how much men love women was easier than actually bringing women to life in a book."

While on the topic of getting comfortable with imperfection, Anne refers to the Navajo creation story in which two hero twins slay monsters to make the world safe for humans. They purposely spare two monsters, poverty and old age, so people appreciate the transience of prosperity and life.

As the interview ends, Anne points to the image in her living room. "It's from *Tony Hillerman's Landscape: [On the Road with Chee and Leaphorn]*," Anne's essay (in conjunction with photographer Don Strel) in tribute to her late father. On closer inspection, the photo's true subject is revealed: a billowy cloud pouring a thick, black column of rain onto the jagged edges of the Grand Canyon's abyss.

Monsters take on unexpected forms. Sometimes a bomb is really just a passing storm, and death a new beginning for a daughter paying tribute to her father while finding her own voice. ■