



10-15-1992

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Recommended Citation

Pellerin, Simone (1992) "Dance Hall of the Dead: A Review," *Westview*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol12/iss1/6>

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DANCE HALL OF THE DEAD

A REVIEW

by *Simone Pellerin*

Tony Hillerman, author of Dance Hall of the Dead, started writing novels just before 1970; although the first publisher he went to see about Messenger Birds (later retitled The Blessing Way) advised him to forget everything about Indians, he didn't give up. For one thing, he wanted to write detective stories because he enjoyed such authors as Eric Gambler, Graham Greene, and Simenon and because he felt tired of producing nothing but newspaper articles after many years working for United Press International as well as teaching journalism at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. But with even deeper urgency, he wanted to write on the Navajos, fascinated as he was by their culture and by their capacity to resist assimilation and eager for Americans to know more about them. Harper and Row finally accepted his book; and up to now, nine other novels dealing with Navajos have been published. In the meantime, he has become widely known and appreciated in the United States as well as abroad.

Hillerman's second novel involving Navajos, Dance Hall of the Dead (1973), like all the previous and following ones, deals with religion and sorcery, which form the background and the foundations on which the investigation is built. At the same time, they account for the specific quality of the suspense. As such, and because of its masterly treatment of the

problem of identity, it is quite representative of Hillerman's creativity. Dance Hall of the Dead is also one of Hillerman's best novels in that it is both exotic to us non-Indians and is written in such a way that, paradoxically, the reader can feel very close to the characters, although they belong to such a different culture.

Apart from working out a good detective story, the purpose of the book is obviously to tell the reader about the Zunis and the Navajos, their way of life and their beliefs. Hillerman is thoroughly documented on all aspects of the subject, but the reader never gets the impression of being taught anything. On the contrary, learning so much information is as easy as can be just because the author is never didactic in any way; what we learn is through following the progress of the investigation and trying to guess what can have happened by taking into account all the information about the way the characters might react, according to their own specific culture.

Quite obviously, then, the other outstanding trait of Hillerman's stories is the handling of inter-ethnic and often inter-tribal relationships. In this respect, Dance Hall of the Dead offers, in my opinion, one of the best examples of finely wrought and extremely complex vision of "others" ever written.

What is most striking in the novel is the way the reader is given all necessary information through a

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series of contacts with different characters—be they white, Zuni, or Navajo—so that all the information is never quite objective, but exclusively subjective. The consequence, then, is a feeling and, more than that, a belief, that any cultural point of view is not only valid but also respectable. From the very first words, the reader is launched into a strange, unfamiliar world, but taken for granted: “Shulawitsi, the Little Fire God, member of the Council of the Gods and Deputy to the Sun, had taped his track shoes to his feet.” The author acts as if the readers already know about the religious context referred to, while they don’t even know yet in what time or place the scene occurs. Only later will they understand that the boy is a Zuni. Besides, as the policeman on the investigation, Joe Leaphorn, is a Navajo, he is as much a stranger in Zuni country as they are; and it is through his Navajo eyes and understanding that they will slowly discover all the details on the Zunis. Furthermore, as Leaphorn considers, studies, and appreciates what he observes among the Zunis by comparison with his own culture, we learn at the same time about the Zunis and the Navajos.

The knowledge of all the ceremonies is intricately interwoven with the investigation proper, in such a way that we can’t understand anything about what is going on if we don’t shift from our own vision of life to that of the Zunis and Navajos. At the same time, it’s through the device of the suspense that we are led, unaware, to dealing with notions and behaviors quite remote from our own. One telling and repeated example is the fact that the Indians in the novel don’t use the words right or left but east or north, etc., which is how Hillerman makes us both feel and understand the Indian’s vision of the world as not revolving around man but as being a whole in which

man is only an element among others, not the center of the universe, but part of it. The tremendous importance of the landscape and the weather in the plot itself force the readers to acknowledge Hillerman’s love for the country, which provides some moving descriptions as well as weighing upon the characters and making us understand that man is dependent upon nature and never its master.

The relationships between different Indian cultures and between whites and Indians are often and successfully described with a great deal of humor, always pointing to the same concern for presenting a different point of view from that of the white man. □



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