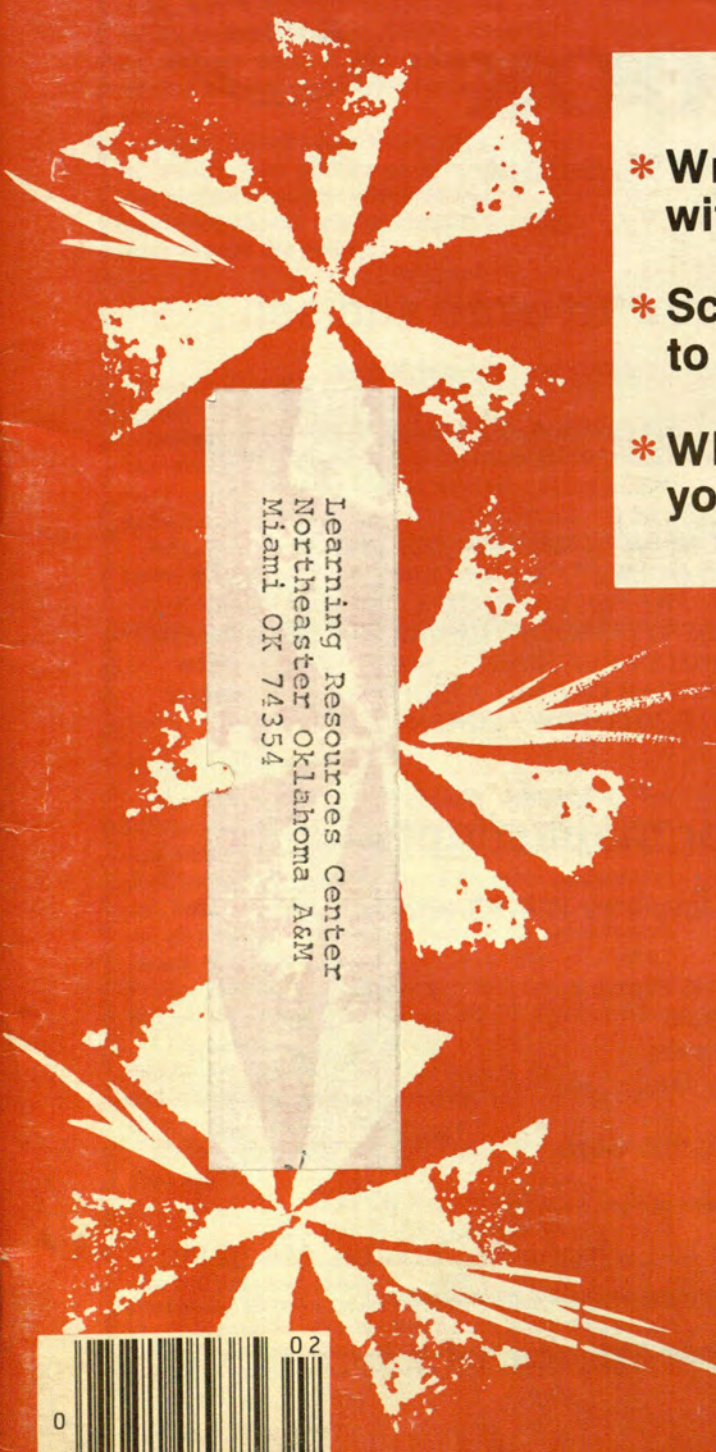


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* **Fiction writing**

* **Writing mystery novels without blueprints**

— Tony Hillerman

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Letters to the editor

Getting into print

While I wholeheartedly agree with Jessica Shaver's conviction ("Getting into Print — Newsprint," November 1985) that Letters to the Editor pave a solid road to instant writer recognition, I am nonetheless wary of her saying that this kind of writing is relatively inferior because of its low dollar value.

In fact, Letters to the Editor are very often ideal as commentary on matters of pressing public interest and represent quality writing at its best. This road to excellence should not be considered inferior to the drive toward the dollar.

JIM FLYNN
New Brunswick, Canada

Jessica Shaver's article was just what I needed to get my writing flowing again.

Before reading it, I was an unpublished writer who was always heading for the top markets with my work. All I received were rejection slips and a deflated ego.

After reading the piece, I glanced through my local paper and immediately found a story that I had a strong opinion about. I wrote my first letter to the editor, and a week later it appeared with my byline.

B. LOUISE STORCK
Ontario, CA

Editors and writers

Olga Litowinsky's concluding sentence ("The Editor's Side," August 1985) — "Perhaps if writers and editors were more sympathetic to each other's problems, we could dispense with petty resentments and bickering and get on with the work" — reached me during the October Bahamas Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference. Our Australian Prime Minister, whom I've met, was tangled with the British Head of State over apartheid in South Africa.

I think that Olga Litowinsky's homily is what professionalism is all about. Perhaps if allies, friends, and neighbors, as well as writers and editors, could forego the petty backbiting . . . ?

It's why I pay \$3.65 Australian for *The Writer* each month.

LES CHARLES WEBBER
Far North Queensland, Australia

The Writer

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Number 2

Building Without Blueprints

by TONY HILLERMAN

IN 37 YEARS of writing, I have accumulated two bits of wisdom which may be worth passing along.

First, I no longer waste two months perfecting that first chapter before getting on with the book. No matter how carefully you have the project planned, first chapters tend to demand rewriting. Things happen. New ideas suggest themselves, new possibilities intrude. Slow to catch on, I collected a manila folder full of perfect, polished, exactly right, pear-shaped first chapters before I learned this lesson. Their only flaw is that they don't fit the book I finally wrote. The only book they will ever fit will be one entitled *Perfect First Chapters* which would be hard to sell. Thus Hillerman's First Law: NEVER POLISH THE FIRST CHAPTER UNTIL THE LAST CHAPTER IS WRITTEN.

The second law takes longer to explain.

When I defend it, I'm like the fellow with his right arm amputated arguing in favor of left-handed bowling. However, here it is:

SOME PEOPLE, SOMETIMES, CAN WRITE A MYSTERY NOVEL WITHOUT AN OUTLINE.

Or, put more honestly: If you lack the patience (or brains) to outline the plot, maybe you can grope your way through it anyway, and sometimes it's for the best.

I was in the third chapter of a book entitled *Listening Woman* when this truth dawned. Here's how it happened:

I had tried to outline three previous mystery novels. Failing, and feeling guilt-ridden and inadequate, I finally finished each of them, by trying to outline a chapter or two ahead as I wrote. I had tried for weeks to blueprint this fourth book, sketching my way through about six chapters. At that point, things became im-

"I can get a novel written to my satisfaction . . . by having faith that, given a few simple ingredients, my imagination will come up with the necessary answers. . . ."

possibly hazy. So I decided to write the section I had blueprinted. Maybe then I could see my way through the rest of it.

I wrote the first chapter exactly as planned, an elaborate look at the villain outsmarting a team of FBI agents on a rainy night in Washington, D.C. I still feel that this chapter may be the best 5,000 words I've ever written. By the time I had finished it, I had a much better feeling for this key character, and for the plot in which he was involved. Unfortunately, this allowed me to see that I was starting the book too early in the chronology of the story I was telling. So this great first chapter went into the manila folder (to be cannibalized later for flashback material). Then I planned a new opening. This one takes place now on the Navajo Reservation at the hogan of an elderly and ailing Navajo widower named Tso. It is mostly a dialogue between him and a shaman he has summoned to determine the cause of his illness. The chapter was intended to establish time, mood, and the extreme isolation of the area of the Navajo Reservation where the novel takes place. It would give the reader a look at Tso, who will be the murder victim, and introduce the shaman, who would be a fairly important character. Finally, the dialogue would provide

Crime writer TONY HILLERMAN is the author of seven mysteries, using Navajo settings and featuring Navajo detectives Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn. Among his prize-winning books, *Dance Hall of the Dead* won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award; two of his other novels have been Edgar finalists. *The Fly on the Wall* was republished by Garland in its "Fifty Classics of Crime Fiction" series, and his 1985 novel, *The Ghostway*, was a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate selection. A former reporter and editor, he is now the Chairman of the Journalism department at the University of New Mexico and a frequent participant at writing seminars. His works have been translated into eight languages.

background information and — in its discussion of Navajo taboos violated by Tso — provide clues meaningless to the FBI, but significant to my Navajo Sherlock Holmes. Again, all went well, but as I wrote it I could sense a flaw.

It was dull. In fact, it was *awfully dull*.

I had planned to have the second chapter take place a month later. In the interim, Tso has been murdered offstage, and the killing is an old unsolved homicide. Why not, I wondered then, have the murder take place during the opening scene? Because then either (a) the shaman would see it, tell the cops, and my novel becomes a short story; or (b) the murderer would zap the shaman, too, messing up my plot. At this stage, a writer who specializes in Navajos and has accumulated a headful of Navajo information searches the memory banks for help. Navajos have a terribly high rate of glaucoma and resulting blindness. Why not a blind old woman shaman? Then how does she get to the isolated Tso hogan? Create a niece, an intern-shaman, who drives the old lady around. The niece gets killed, and now you have a double murder done while the blind woman is away at a quiet place having her trance. You also have an opportunity to close the chapter with a dandy little non-dull scene in which the blind woman, calling angrily for her newly-deceased niece, taps her way with her cane across the scene of carnage. The outline is bent, but still recognizable.

Early in chapter two, another bend. The revised plan still calls for introducing my protagonist, Navajo Police Lt. Joe Leaphorn, and the villain. Joe stops Gruesome George for speeding, whereupon G.G. tries to run over Joe, roars away, abandons his car and eludes pursuit. Two paragraphs into this chapter, it became apparent that Joe needed someone in the patrol car with him to convert the draggy in-

“Without an outline, I can hardly wait to see how my novel will turn out. . . .”

ternal monologue I was writing into snappy dialogue. So I invent a young sheep thief, handcuff him securely, and stick him in the front seat. He turns out to be wittier than I had expected, which distorts things a bit, but nothing serious goes wrong. Not yet. Leaphorn stops the speeder and is walking toward the speeder's car. As many writers do, I imagine myself into scenes — seeing, hearing, smelling everything I am describing.

What does Leaphorn see? His patrol car emergency light flashing red reflections off the speeder's windshield. Through the windshield, he sees the gold rimmed glasses I'll use as a label for Gruesome George until we get him identified. What else? My imagination turns whimsical. Why not put in another pair of eyes? Might need another character later. Why not put them in an unorthodox place — peering out of the back seat of the sedan? But why would anyone be sitting in the back? Make it a dog. A huge dog. In a crate. So the dog goes in. I can always take him out.

Still we seem to have only a minor deflection from the unfinished, modified version of the partial outline. But a page or two later, in chapter three, it became obvious that this unplanned, unoutlined dog was going to be critically important. I could see how this ugly animal could give the villain a previous life and the sort of character I had to hang on him. More important, I could begin to see Dog (already evolved into a trained attack dog) could be used to build tension in the story. As I thought about the dog, I began to see how my unblueprinted sheep thief would become the way to solve another plot problem.

Since that third chapter of my fourth mystery novel, I have honestly faced the reality. For me, working up a detailed outline simply isn't a good idea. I should have learned that much earlier.

For example, in my first effort at mystery fiction, *The Blessing Way*, I introduce the Gruesome George character in a trading post on the Reservation. He is buying groceries

while my protagonist watches, slightly bored. I, too, am slightly bored. So is the reader. Something needs to be done to generate a bit of interest. I decide to insert a minor mystery. I have the fellow buy a hat, put his expensive silver concha hatband on it, and tell the storekeeper that someone had stolen the original hat. Why would someone steal a hat and leave behind an expensive silver hatband? My protagonist ponders this oddity and can't think of any reason. Neither can I. If I can't think of one later, out will come the hat purchase and in will go some other trick to jar the reader out of his nap. But the hat stayed in. My imagination worked on it in the context of both the Navajo culture and my plot requirements. It occurred to me that such a hat, stained with its wearer's sweat, would serve as the symbolic “scalp” required at a Navajo ceremonial (an Enemy Way) to cure witchcraft victims and to kill witches. When my policeman sees the stolen hat (identified by the missing hatband) in this ritual role, it leads him to the solution of his mystery. (And the author to the completion of his book.)

I HAVE gradually learned that this sort of creative thinking happens for me only when I am at very close quarters with what I am writing — only when I am in the scene, in the mind of the viewpoint character, experiencing the chapter and sharing the thinking of the people in it. From the abstract distance of an outline, with the characters no more than names, nothing seems real to me. At this distance, the details which make a plot come to life always elude me.

Another example: In *Fly on the Wall*, the principal character is a political reporter. He has been lured into the dark and empty state capitol building in the wee hours on the promise that doors will be left unlocked to give him access to confidential tax files. He spots the trap and flees, pursued by two armed men. Before I began writing this section, I had no luck at all coming up with an idea of how I could allow

him to escape without straining reader suspension of disbelief. Now, inside these spooky, echoing halls, I think as my frightened character would think, inspired by his terror. No place to hide in the empty hallways. Get out of them. Try a door. Locked, of course. All office doors would be locked. Almost all. How about the janitor's supply room which the night watchman uses as his office? That door is open. Hide there. (Don't forget to dispose of the watchman.) A moment of safety, but only a moment until the hunters think of this place. Here are the fuse boxes which keep the hall lights burning. Cut off the power. Darken the building. Meanwhile, the readers are wondering, what's happened to the night watchman? Where is he? That breathing you suddenly hear over the pounding of your own heart, not a yard away in the pitch blackness, is the watchman, knocked on the head and tied up. Check his holster. Empty, of course. So what do you do? The hunters know where the fuse boxes are. They are closing in. Feel around in the darkness for a weapon. And what do you feel on the shelves in a janitor's storeroom? All sorts of stuff, including a gallon jug of liquid detergent. You open the door and slip out into the dark hallway, running down the cold marble floor in your sock feet, hearing the shout of your pursuer, dribbling the detergent out of the jug behind you as you sprint down the stairs.

In an outline I would never have thought of the janitor's supply room, nor of the jug of liquid detergent. Yet the detergent makes the hero's escape plausible and is a credible way to eliminate one of the two pursuers as required by the plot. Even better, it is raw material for a deliciously hideous scene — hero running sock-footed down the marble stairway, liquid soap gushing out behind him from the jug. Bad guy in his leather-soled shoes sprinting after him. Except for describing the resulting noises, the writer can leave it to the reader's imagination.

A big plus for working without an outline, right? The big negative is that I forgot Hero had removed his shoes and had no way to recover them. The editor didn't notice it either, but countless readers did — upbraiding me for having the hero operating in his socks throughout the following chapter.

I HAVE learned, slowly, that outlining a plot in advance is neither possible, nor useful, for me. I can get a novel written to my satisfaction only by using a much freer form and having faith that — given a few simple ingredients — my imagination will come up with the necessary answers.

Those ingredients — not in any order of importance:

- *A setting with which I am intimately familiar.* Although I have been nosing around the Navajo Reservation and its borderlands for more than 30 years, I still revisit the landscape I am using before I start a new book — and often revisit it again while I am writing it. And then I work with a detailed, large scale map beside my word processor.

- *A general idea of the nature of the mystery* which needs to be solved, and a good idea of the motive for the crime, or crimes.

- *A theme.* For example, *The Dark Wind* exposes my Navajo cop to a crime motivated by revenge — to which Navajos attach no value and find difficult to understand.

- *One or two important characters,* in addition to the policeman-protagonist. However, even these characters tend to be foggy at first. In *Dance Hall of the Dead*, the young anthropology graduate student I had earmarked as the murderer turned out to be too much of a weakling for the job. Another fellow took on the role.

When I finish this, I will return to Chapter Eight of the present "work in progress." My policeman has just gone to the Farmington jail, where I had intended to have him interview a suspect. Instead he has met the suspect's attorney — a hard-nosed young woman who, as the dialogue progressed, outsmarted my cop at every turn. This woman did not exist in my nebulous plans for this book and has no role. But I have a very strong feeling that she will assume one and that it will be a better book because of her.

That's a good argument against outlines. Without one, I can hardly wait to see how this book will turn out. □

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