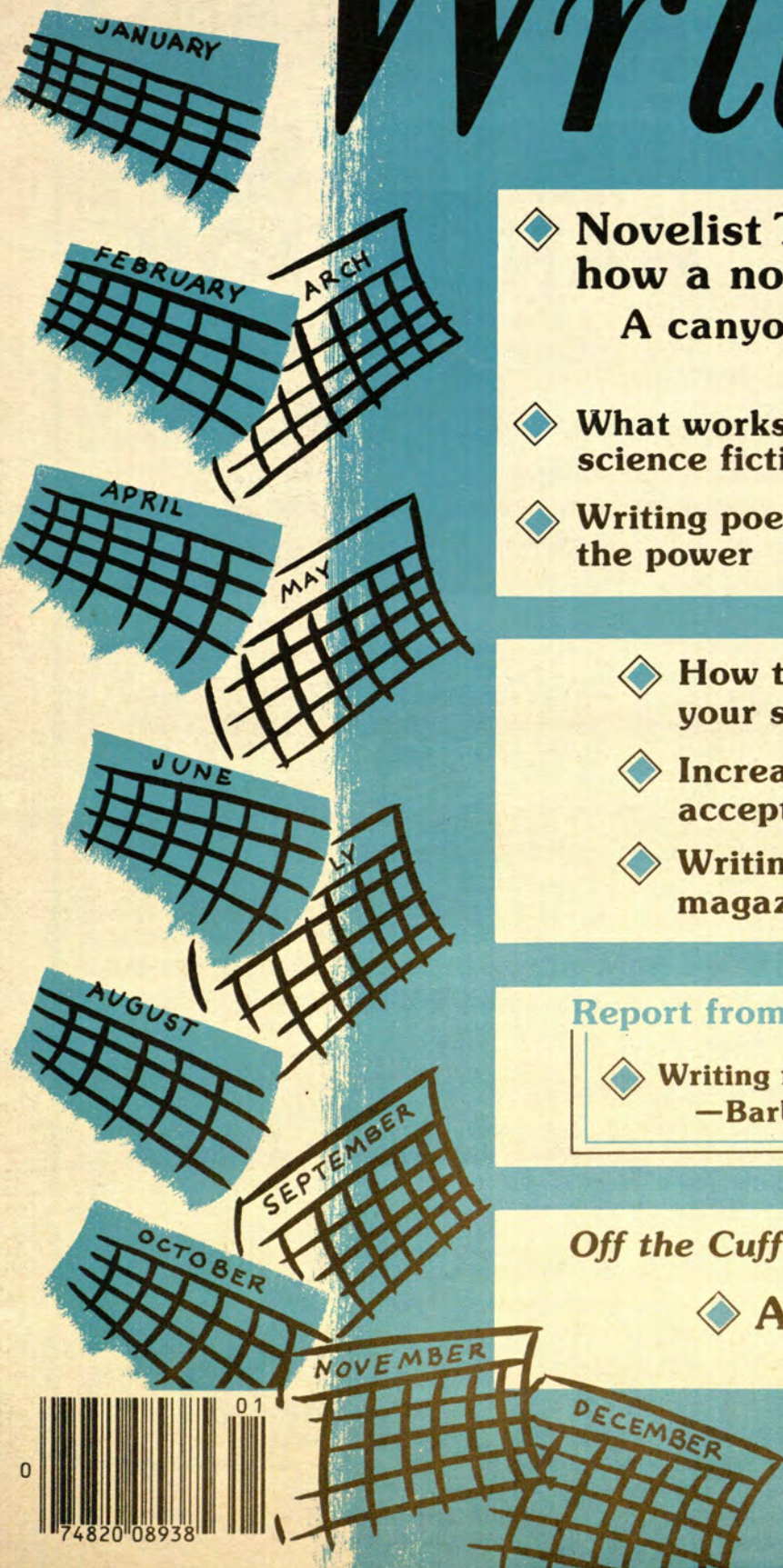


THE

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


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*The story of how a novel evolved. . .*

## A Canyon, An Egret, and A Book

by TONY HILLERMAN

ON PAGE 185 OF *A Thief of Time*, readers encounter a snowy egret, flushed from his roosting place in the San Juan River Canyon by a Navajo Tribal Policeman. The policeman is fictional. But the canyon is real and so is the startled egret. Therein lies a tale of how a novel evolved and how a silent, empty place can stimulate the human imagination.

It happened because of one of those odd confluences of needs that sometimes occur. I needed locations, and inspiration, for a book that was trying to take shape in my head. Specifically, I needed an Anasazi cliff dwelling in an isolated

place. There I intended to have a pot hunter murder an anthropologist. That was to be the pivotal point in a story about those "thieves of time" who loot ancient ruins. Since the anthropologist, the pot hunter, and the crime would be pure fiction, it would seem logical that the cliff dwelling could be fictional as well. But logic doesn't apply when I am trying to write a novel. For some reason I need almost to memorize the landscape I write about.

Meanwhile, two other coinciding needs had developed. Dan Murphy of the U.S. Park Service was feeling a need to show me — a skeptic —



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## “How a silent, empty place can stimulate the human imagination . . .”

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that the San Juan River canyon above Lake Powell was as awe-inspiring as he had been claiming. And Charles DeLorme of Wild River Expeditions at Bluff, Utah, needed two people to go along on a raft trip he was organizing. He needed someone to explain to his paying guests the geology, flora and fauna of the canyon they would be seeing and someone to tell them campfire stories about the mythology, culture, and history of the Navajos, whose territory the river invades. Thus Murphy and I signed on to float down the San Juan as natural historian and yarn spinner, respectively.

About three miles into the journey, we pulled our rafts onto the north shore and inspected an unexcavated mound where some nine hundred years of drifted dust buried an Anasazi ruin. Above it, footholds cut into the stone mark the path they used to reach the mesa top. A mile farther along, we made another stop and examined what is, in effect, an Anasazi mural. Here petroglyphs were cut through the dark manganese oxide (“desert varnish”) stains on the sandstone face of the cliff — forming rows and rows of figures. Some I could identify. One was obviously a snowy egret. Others are abstract representations of the reptiles, birds and animals that still inhabit the canyon (or, like the Big Horn Sheep, have vanished with the Anasazis). But many of the forms are humanoid shapes with great square shoulders cut into the stone and represent (anthropologists believe) the kachina spirits. Stripes are cut over their heads indicating

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TONY HILLERMAN’s newest novel featuring the Navajo Tribal Police Lt. Joe Leaphorn and Officer Jim Chee and set in Navajo country, is *Coyote Waits*, which made its way to the bestseller list immediately upon publication last summer. His earlier novels include *A Thief of Time* (about which this article is written), *Talking God*, *The Blessing Way*, and *The Dance Hall of the Dead*, for which he received LeGrand Prix de Literature Policiere. Many of his novels have been book club selections and have received high critical as well as popular acclaim.

This article is a shortened version of a piece that was originally written for *Audubon Magazine*.

whatever one’s imagination suggests — perhaps speech, or song, or rank, of magical power.

My own imagination was trying to deal with this remarkable mural cliff through the eyes of two fictional characters. One is Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police, whom I’ve used for years and know as one knows a dear old friend. No problem with Joe. I know how his mind works. But the other character was a still nebulous stranger — my murder victim. I had decided to make him a contract archaeologist working for the U.S. Park Service. This character was a male, and existed only as about 45 words on paper on my desk. He was to be a specialist in something yet to be decided, and he was supposed to be dead by the end of the first chapter — the victim of the murder on which the plot of this book would turn.

AS I STARED at figures cut into this cliff, I found myself thinking of the artists who carved it. They would have used tools of sharpened antlers and flint. It would have been a hard, hot job on a summer day like this. I thought of their scarred and calloused hands. That led me to remember the hands of a woman archaeologist I know — a beautiful, graceful young woman who rarely is seen without at least one finger bandaged. Suddenly, I found myself thinking of my murder victim as a woman. She had the scarred, calloused hands of digging archaeologists and a Phi Beta Kappa mind. She was a working class woman — an oddity in this field. Thus under this cliff where Anasazi artists toiled a thousand years ago, what had been a one-dimensional character changed gender in my mind and developed a personality, with a memory of family, with a failed marriage, an admiration for an older man she wants to impress, and a love of the abstract art she sees on this cliff. It’s a shame she was to die so soon.

On the Navajo side of the river the stone walls of a small Anasazi cliff dwelling are visible, high



under the arched roof of the wall of a small side canyon. We drifted past that canyon's mouth. On the opposite side of the river a massive sandstone overhang shelters another ruin — some of its walls still intact all the way to the natural stone roof.

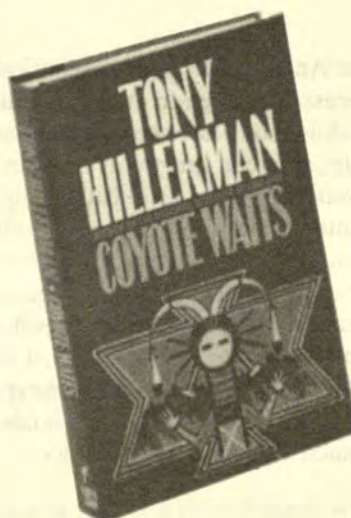
The raft crew calls this place "River House." Its most prominent feature is a roundish stone tower that looks a little like a silo and must have been used for storage of grain or other foodstuff.

It was cool on the earthen floor of River House, and quiet — a good place to sit and think bookish thoughts. This ruin has never been officially excavated by a research team. But it has been tentatively probed by pot hunters. They have left shallow holes in the hummock of earth that must have been this family's trash heap and is, therefore, a likely place for Anasazi burials. It has also been vandalized. The raft crew told me that the vandal is a member of an unpopular Navajo family that had moved across the river from the reservation. They described him as a boy with severe emotional problems.

And so, while I sat looking at the damage this boy has done, a possible first chapter took shape! A Navajo boy, a neurotic loner, would be a witness to my intended murder. I convert him from a vandal per se into a would-be artist who paints pictographs on cliffs. My Navajo policeman knows by their nature that they must be of Navajo origin, finds the boy, solves the crime. But this River House is too visible to be an appropriate scene for my crime. My setting needs isolation. Murphy told me that the ruins downstream and up a canyon on the Navajo side of the river were much better.

From River House, an old trail leads a half mile downstream to the mouth of Comb Wash and up to traces of an old road that climbs Comb Ridge, a barrier of solid rock. The road was cut by the Mormons Brigham Young had sent to establish an outpost on the San Juan where Bluff is now located. For me it was an ordeal to huff and puff up the traces of that old exploit, even burdened with nothing heavier than a canteen.

The road leads past a circular mound that must cover the remains of an unusually large ceremonial kiva and to an impressive long view over the Bluff Valley and the sandstone wilderness that surrounds it. The climb also brought to mind the sort of iron-willed men and women who were the ancestors of Bluff.



THUS *A Thief of Time* took another of its quirky turns. I decided I would try to work in just such a Mormon as a character — an elderly man, if possible. Not many months before, the home of a prominent citizen of this Southern Utah canyon country had been raided by the federals. The man's collection of artifacts had been seized, and he'd been accused of dealing in illegal Anasazi pots. For my purposes, that was perfect material for the sort of red herring subplot I'm always looking for.

Beside the river below this high edge of Comb Ridge, there still stands the stone foundation of a water wheel used to grind grain into flour, and above this old mill stand the roofless ruins of a one-room building. Murphy told me this structure was built as a trading post, that its owner was shot to death in a dispute with two Navajo customers — who then fled across the San Juan and vanished.

That story stuck in my memory. I found myself looking for a spot where two men — probably poor swimmers — could have crossed without drowning. Could my fictional neurotic young Navajo swim? Such bootless mental exercises explain why writers of fiction have reputations for blank expressions and absent-mindedness. This train of thought was occupying my imagination when our approaching raft caused the snowy egret to rise out of a clump of tamarisk and seep willows on a sandbar just ahead of our raft. He flew slowly, no more than six feet above the water, a graceful shape gleaming white against the dark, shadowed cliffs ahead. And then he disappeared around a river bend. I remembered the petroglyph egret. A thousand years ago, I



think, the Anasazi artist saw an identical bird and was impressed enough to preserve him in stone.

Since childhood I have been impressed by birds — an idle, amateur student of crow migrations, of how mocking birds tease cats, of the kaleidoscope patterns that snow geese use to form their first dawn flights from water, of the concentrated patience of the heron waiting for the minnow to move nearer. Here was just one egret, no mate, no companions. Are snowy egrets, I wondered, like swans and wolves, among those species that mate only once, and for life? What holds this great bird in such a lonely, empty place?

**B**Y THE TIME we were rolling out our sleeping bags and building our evening fire, things were coming clear about my book. The egret would have his place in it somehow, and the thoughts of his solitary presence seemed to be turning the tale of action I had intended into a novel of character. I found myself trying to attach the same perpetual monogamy I had imagined for the egret to one of the characters. I tried it first on the victim. (By now she had become Dr. Eleanor Friedman-Bernal to me, with the hyphenated Bernal to drop as soon as her divorce became final.) It didn't work. She was the wrong type. I turned from that to collecting the sort of impressions she would collect as she arrived at this place. She would make the trip secretly and at night, since her dig would be illegal. She would have the sort of nervousness that law-abiding people feel when they are knowingly breaking the law. Still, she would be stirred by this evening as I was. Violet-green swallows and "nighthawks" are out, patrolling the twilight for insects. A beaver, looking old and tired, swims slowly up the river keeping out the current and paying no attention to me. I hear the song of frogs and, as the rising moon lights the tops of the cliffs, a coyote and his partner begin exchanging coyote talk high above us on Nokaito Bench. Battalions of bats flash through the firelight making their high-pitched little calls. I make notes of all of this, using reality to spare my imagination. I still had a lot of work to do on this plot.

While not a drop of rain had fallen here, a substantial flash flood had roared down the wash. The bottom is muddy and the potholes still hold water. In these the eggs of Leopard Frogs had

hatched, and the new generation (about thumb-nail size) was everywhere ahop. Such frogs are exactly the sort of specific details I look for, hoping they will make fictional landscapes seem real. I would remember these frogs.

For a collector of such odds and ends as Leopard Frogs, Dan Murphy is a perfect guide. He had come to show me a specific cliff dwelling. But en route he showed me the trap door lid under which a wolf spider was lurking, a Navajo pictograph in which a man on foot is shooting an arrow at a big-hatted horseman who is shooting a pistol at him; "Baseball Man," an unusual Anasazi pictograph that depicts — larger than life — a figure that seems to be holding a big reddish chest protector, like a home plate umpire. But the cliff dwelling at the end of this long walk was the prize.

Reaching it involved climbing out of the wash bottom onto a broad stone shelf, which led to a second level of cliffs and past another of those petroglyph murals, decorated with beautifully preserved depictions of the little humpbacked flute player anthropologists call Kokopela.

Anthropologists believe Kokopela was the Anasazi fertility figure, and he may be seen carved into cliffs and painted on lava rocks throughout Anasazi country. At the moment I was thinking of his flute. Specifically I was considering how eerie it would seem if my foredoomed anthropologist, aware of the presence of these figures, hears the piping of his music in the canyon darkness. But how? Can I make my neurotic Navajo a musician? That seems strained. I dismissed the idea. It refused to go away.

The flute player notion was still with me when we reached the ruins Murphy had thought would be exactly right for my purposes. They were far better than anything I could have imagined. Behind a curve in the towering sandstone wall of the mesa, nature had formed a cavernous amphitheater some fifty feet deep, sixty feet wide, and perhaps seventy feet from floor to ceiling. A seep high up the face of the cliff produced enough water to cause a green curtain of moss and ivy to thrive beneath it and to feed a shallow basin perhaps ten or twelve feet across on the stone floor of the alcove. Behind this pool on a ledge some twelve feet above the alcove floor an Anasazi family had built its stone home. The cen-

*(Continued on page 45)*



## A Canyon, an Egret, and a Book

(Continued from page 12)

turies had done their damage, but the walls of the small structure were mostly intact. Up the cliff at the edge of the alcove a ladder of footholds had been cut into the stone. They lead to a shelf high above. There another stone structure still stands, probably built as the family's desperate last defense if danger came and trapped them.

The pool had produced its own swarm of the inevitable Leopard Frogs. Watching them raised many questions in my mind: Were those drought-resistant frogs here when the Anasazi family occupied the house behind me? How would it have felt to have lived in this lonely place as the tag end of a dying culture? What was this danger so fierce that it caused these people to build their tiny little fort?

I imagine the family huddled behind the walls above. I make it night. A dark night. Something has frightened them into scurrying up the footholds, listening. Hearing what? The Anasazis become Eleanor Friedman-Bernal, already uneasy by the illegality of her dig here, and now hiding, terrified. What does she hear? I think of Kokopela's flute — music from a spirit vanished a thousand years. Crazy, I think. And while I am into the craziness, I try again to do something

with the neurotic Navajo. I change him to a neurotic local Mormon boy whose only relief from some mental illness is music. But what is he doing here? Hiding out after committing some crime I will dream up later. What else would Eleanor hear? The frogs, perhaps, hopping about on the fringes of pool. I try to look at the frogs through the eyes of a mentally ill boy hiding here. The majestic snowy egret reinserts itself into this daydreaming, and with it, my speculation about its loneliness and its faithfulness. An idea comes, and another.

Gradually, my Navajo Tribal Policeman became a widower, and the framework for my tale became the makings of a novel.

It took another trip down the San Juan Canyon, and up Chinle Wash, before I could complete it all. This time I went during what the Navajos call "the Season when the Thunder Sleeps." In this rainless time, the potholes in the wash were dry, and so was the pool under the ruins. The frogs had vanished; the snowy egret had vanished, too. But the ruins of the trading post on the shelf above the river were there and I visited them again because now they were firmly planted in my mind. How could a crime that had destroyed a family leave a memory that would destroy a man today? I began to see how it could happen.

And thus the San Juan Canyon generated another story. □

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## What Works for Me

(Continued from page 15)

notation of a well-chosen name reinforce the impression of a character's personality. Naturally, you don't want to dub a hairy-chested hero "Steele Hammer" — but don't "Kimball Kinnison" or "Robert Hedrock" suggest strength and masculinity? So does "Lazarus Long," as well as recalling this man's origin in the Bible Belt; and the "Woodrow Wilson Smith" that he originally was tells us still more about his background. "Harold Shea" is memorable without being so assertive, well suited to a fellow who is neither all bold adventurer nor all klutz, but a very human blend of both. As for women, well, "Wyoming Knott" is obviously a strong, independent sort, while "Maire ní Donnall," although no wimp herself, is one to die for.

Fourth, these examples happen to be of North European origin, but we have a whole worldful of languages to draw on, adding color, individuation, and a sense of rich background. A good source of fresh names is the encyclopedia, in its mention of long-obscure foreign figures. Another is the citations in professional journals like *Science*. A third is the phone book of any large American city. Needless to say, given names should be altered, and no surname borrowed that belongs to somebody prominent.

Sorry for not having any marvelous secrets or inspirational visions, only stuff about grubby detail work. Yet doesn't the glamour often arise from this, along with the satisfaction of a job honestly done? □

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