

Tony Hillerman's first article published in a national magazine was about the presence of the Bubonic plague in New Mexico. The following is an un-edited excerpt from the forthcoming Tony Hillerman: A Biography scheduled to be published in 2021.

Chapter 13

No More Excuses

The tangible promise of a writing career persuaded Tony Hillerman to tap the anemic family checking account for a plane ticket to New York City early in 1964 to meet Professor Morris Freedman's literary agent. With more than two decades of publishing experience, Ann Elmo ran a successful agency and was known by most book editors in the personal tight-knit world of New York City publishing. Hillerman reached her office on Fifth Avenue, three blocks up from the city's magnificent public library, in time for his 11 AM appointment. Ushered into Elmo's office, he found the diminutive, dark-haired agent behind a desk stacked with manuscripts. When she looked up from her work, Elmo appeared puzzled until Hillerman reminded her of Freedman's introduction.

She agreed to take a look at the stories Hillerman drew from his briefcase and assured him she would call him at his hotel. "On the way out," said Hillerman, "I noticed that it was now four minutes after eleven—about an hour and fifty-six minutes less of her time than I had expected." It turned out that the shortness of the meeting was Elmo's style not an inauspicious sign. Later, when she made the promised telephone call, Elmo told Hillerman she thought she could sell two or three of his stories.

By July, Elmo got her first nibble. It came from *True* magazine, one of several magazines competing for the male reader in the mid 1960s. Unlike *True's* rivals *Penthouse* and *Playboy*, the magazine had no photographs of unclad women. Rather it was described by one observer as "a song to the outdoors" that urged "upon the reader ways of living with the land, rather than conquering it." What caught the editors' interest was Hillerman's article on outbreak of the bubonic plague in New Mexico. To New York magazine editors, the distant lands of New Mexico, its ancient people, and Spanish colonial heritage already possessed a romantic exotic allure. Mixing in the Black Death could make for an enthralling article. But Dick Adler, one of *True's* editors, told Hillerman the story would need considerable revision. "We see the piece as a detective story," he said. "Can you make more of the ending building up the climax so it has all the excitement of a classic denouement?" Adler provided a list of specific demands. The most important revision was to recast the work so that biologist Bryan E. Miller was given "almost a Sherlock Holmes treatment" in his pursuit of the villainous bacteria *Pastuerella-pestis* that causes the plague. "With these changes," he said, "I think you will have a saleable piece."

The editor's instructions challenged Hillerman who had been trained to reveal as much as possible as early as possible in a story—the so-called inverted pyramid of news reporting. So far, in the writing he had done for professor Freedman he had not strayed far from traditional expository writing. With the summer ahead of him and free from his studies, Hillerman agreed to try. He retained much of his reporting such as his dramatic moment when the "dusky cyanotic color" of sheep herder Amado Ortega's nails and lips raised alarm at St. Vincent's Hospital in Santa Fe. "To be exact," wrote Hillerman, "they were the color of the Black Death. Had a physician of the fourteenth century seen these signs he would have evacuated the city." But Hillerman

shuffled and tweaked his copy to make Miller's pursuit of the source of the infection and halt its spread the narrative thread.

In previous instances, Miller's luck had been with him and he had been easily able to pin down point of origin. But where dead sheep herder had contracted the sickness was in the Pecos wilderness, a spot frequented by thousands of campers and visitors. "Children love to chase chipmunks, golden mantle squirrels, and other small mountain animals," explained Hillerman. "Sick animals are easily caught, and they would be captured at a time when the fleas they carry were loaded with plague bacilli."

Miller's detective work grew more pressing when another fatal case surfaced that may have come from prairie dogs near Santa Fe. He suspended his Pecos search, obtained reinforcements, and rushed to Santa Fe. Summer days passed and Miller remained no closer in either places to finding the origins of the plague. But a doctor in Pecos, aware of the plague's presence, correctly interpreted the hard, discolored walnut-size bumps surrounding the groin of one of his patients as the bubonic plague. He administered the prescribed drugs and saved the man's life. It gave Miller the break he needed. "A man who has been touched by *Pasteurella pestis* and was still alive to talk about it," wrote Hillerman.

Miller and his crew, using information from the survivor, set traps and performed field autopsies on the captured rodents. "The monotonous work continued," wrote Hillerman, "and as it continued, fear grew that Miller's X on the map merely marked a bad guess." But then Miller spotted an irregular pattern of dark spots on the spleen of a squirrel. More squirrels were caught and tested. The origins of the plague had been found. The infected population of Grass Mountain ground squirrels were trapped and killed. When the next summer came, the plague did not return. Hillerman closed the article with children in Pecos singing "Ring around the Rosy" unaware that the children's song came from the Middle Ages and the lugubrious meaning of "we all fall down." Miller and his colleagues had won this time. "But the Black Death is still in the mountains."

By September, Hillerman's revisions approached the desired mark. Adler had been correct. Putting biologist Miller at the center of the search for the source of the Black Plague worked. "His education had made him a biologist," wrote Hillerman, "his profession had made him a hunter." Hillerman's piece now possessed a page-turning suspense. The magazine's managing editor, upon reading the new draft, told Adler, "This guy is a good writer and he is really almost there." Hillerman made yet one more round of revisions, adding yet more detective-style drama. In October the article was accepted. The magazine paid \$1,000. After taking out Elmo's \$100 agent's commission, the check was considerable addition to Hillerman's \$9,000 yearly salary.

But Hillerman, unused to this kind of heavy-handed editing typical in magazine work, complained to Elmo about the revisions he been required to make. "I know how hard you worked on the article, getting it through so many revisions to please *True* editors," Elmo wrote back, "but it's heartening that you managed to satisfy them." The experience showed, in his words, "an old wire-service man" that while facts were not malleable, the writing of nonfiction could be. The detective approach to his story had worked. It was an effective way to introduce tension and retain the reader's interest. The editor worked on a tag line to tease the publication of "Black Death In the Southwest and settled on, "For a young man named Bryan Miller, this bubonic plague organism was his adversary in a duel that could leave much of the Southwest a mass graveyard."