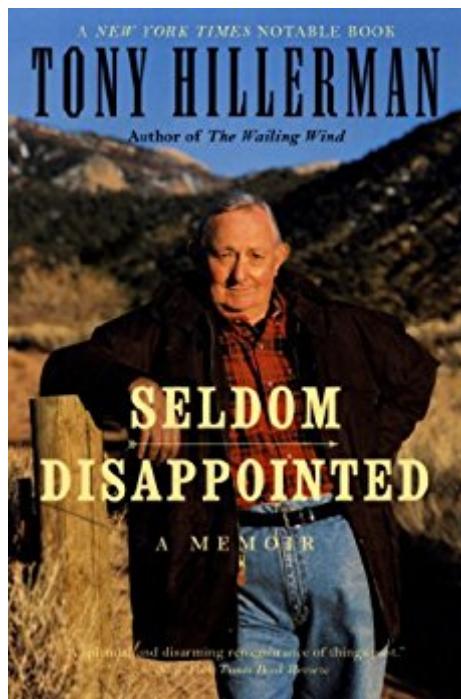


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Seldom Disappointed: A Memoir



Synopsis

When Tony Hillerman looks back at seventy-six years spent getting from hardtimes farm boy to bestselling author, he sees lots of evidence that Providence was poking him along. For example, when an absentminded Army clerk left him off the hospital ship taking the wounded home from France, the mishap put him on a collision course with a curing ceremony held for two Navajo Marines, thereby providing the grist for a writing career that now sees his books published in sixteen languages around the world and often on bestseller lists. Or, for example, when his agent told him his first novel was so bad that it would hurt both of their reputations, he nonetheless sent it to an editor, and that editor happened to like the Navajo stuff. In this wry and whimsical memoir, Hillerman offers frequent backward glances at where he found ideas for plots of his books and the characters that inhabit them. He takes us with him to death row, where he interviews a man about to die in the gas chamber and details how this murderer became Colton Wolf in one of his novels. He relates how flushing a solitary heron from a sandbar caused him to convert Joe Leaphorn from husband to widower, and how his self-confessed bias against the social elite solved the key plot problem in *A Thief of Time*. No child abuse stories here: The worst Hillerman can recall is being sent off to first grade (in a boarding school for Indian girls) clad in cute blue coveralls instead of the manly overalls his farm-boy peers all wore. Instead we get a good-natured trip through hard times in college; an infantry career in which he "rose twice to Private First Class" and also won a Silver Star, Bronze Star, and Purple Heart; and, afterward, work as a truck driver, chain dragger, journalist, professor, and "doer of undignified deeds" for two university presidents. All this is colored by a love affair (now in its fifty-fourth year) with Marie, which involved raising six children, most of them adopted. Using the gifts of a talented novelist and reporter, seventy-six-year-old Tony Hillerman draws a brilliant portrait not just of his life but of the world around him.

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Customer Reviews

"Seldom Disappointed" Tony Hillerman ISBN 0-06-019445-6 I am one of those readers Tony Hillerman writes about in this memoir who does not like mysteries but reads his books. Like those folks, the Navajo cultural stuff is what interests me. Well, maybe there is something more than that. It is Tony Hillerman's remarkable ability to tell a story. Hillerman grew up in Oklahoma, the son of poor parents for whom he had much respect. The title of his memoir comes from something his mother used to say, that one who did not expect too much from life was seldom disappointed. This was an outlook not uncommon to Hillerman's generation. Also, like many young men of his generation, he went off to the war in Europe. As a combat infantryman, Hillerman won the silver star, the bronze star, and got blown-up by a mine. Yet there is little bitterness in him about the war. This is one of the few memoirs relating to WWII in which a former soldier describes the opposing German soldiers as "other teenagers". The casual manner in which Hillerman writes about his war experiences and later about his literary success seems to reflect a stoic outlook about "that short run toward the Last Great Adventure". After the war, a couple of years studying journalism at the University of Oklahoma led to work as a reporter in Texas, Oklahoma, and eventually New Mexico. Fifteen years of newspaper work and being editor of the Albuquerque paper led to some connections with the University of New Mexico and its journalism department. Hillerman taught there for about fifteen years until he lost his enthusiasm for teaching and wanted to write. Hillerman learned the Navajo culture from Navaho acquaintances who sensed his sincere interest.

I've enjoyed reading many of Tony Hillerman's mysteries which are more about understanding bits of pieces of Native American culture in the high mountain country of New Mexico and the interactions of individuals, a nice contrast to the fast-paced, urban-setting mysteries rife with sex, violence, and foul-mouthed bad guys of many mystery authors. His memoir will delight his many

fans because the picture it paints is one of an unassuming person who grew up in the poverty of the Great Depression, did more than his share as an infantry grunt in WWII, and relates his post-war life with his beloved wife, Marie, with warmth and modesty. The book is plain and simply written and Hillerman's self-effacing demeanor sets it apart from the memoirs of other authors and artists who see the world only through the prism of their own egos. Hillerman does not reflect deeply on What It All Means, but merely relates in matter-of-fact fashion a journey through life. His infantry tour describing the conditions in the bitter winter of 1944-45 concludes that Army Intelligence was seldom correct, the West Pointers directing the war were often but dimly aware of what was really needed, e.g., winter garb for what turned out to be the snowiest winter in Western Europe in 40 years, and that confusion and ignorance were constant companions. His "grunt" experiences are comparable to those described in more detail, and with much more reflection, by Raymond Gantler in his fine book, "Roll Me Over" written soon after WWII, of similar situations and experiences. Hillerman's post-war experiences of university life, journalism, and, finally, his quest to be a novelist make up the final third of the memoir.

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