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How to Use Joe Leaphorn and Walter Longmire in Your History (And English) Classroom

There are multiple periods in U.S. History fraught with peril, in terms of how to cover them in a classroom setting. Slavery, the subjugation of Native Americans, the interment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. How can such 'touchy' subjects be covered in a responsible manner? In the English Literature survey class, the issue is coverage. How much time is devoted to Native American literature? Is any time devoted? In the U.S. History survey class, the issue is not coverage but time. How much time is there for the stormy, violent relationship between Native Americans and White settlers? Once Pilgrims and Indians and the first Thanksgiving are covered, then what? Is there any time left for a look at modern day relations between the two factions? The question becomes what to cover and how much? If you're looking for an innovative way to introduce modern day Indian society, problems and all, look no further than the Joe Leaphorn and Walt Longmire novels, written by Tony Hillerman and Craig Johnson, respectively.

In U.S. History as in English Literature, what the student perceives to be truth can greatly effect how they understand and process the information they are given. They also bring certain perceptions into the classroom based on personal experience, other classes they have taken and information gleaned from the relationships they have had with family, friends, co-workers. It is one of the jobs of the professor to find out what those are and find a way to work with them. The easiest way to find out what those preconceived notions are, is to ask. In regards to this paper, the question could be as simple as 'What do you think of when someone says The West?' If there are people from other parts of the world in the class, the question can be modified to say 'The U.S.

West'. Listen to the response. Make a list if need be. Some possible responses could be: desert, cactus, cowboys, Indians, gold, John Wayne, California. Other questions to ask could be: 'What is the weather like in The West?', 'What kind of people live in The West?', 'What is it like to live in The West?', 'Why do people live in The West?' Do not be surprised by the answers given. This list of questions is vital for opening up the students understanding of something they, probably, haven't thought much about, what other people are like in other parts of the world and/or country. For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that the students in question live in the United States of America and attended college in the U.S.

Ask one final question, 'Where does your information about The West come from?' Do not be surprised if the main answer appears to be 'The Internet, TV, movies'. Students of today live in a highly digital society. Reams of information, far more than their parents or grandparents ever had is available with a few taps on a screen. Having such easy access to vast amounts of knowledge is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing in that they can find whatever they need for a class, quickly and easily. A curse in that much of that information is wrong and they don't know that it is. A lot of students, and adults, have this belief that because information is on the computer screen and matches what they think they know, that information must be correct. Because the information is available so quickly, the student does not develop the necessary attention span needed to succeed in college or in life. If they can pull up a website on any subject at will, why do they need to sit in a classroom and listen to a professor drone on about a subject they are not particularly interested in. They want the information and they want it NOW! Not at the end of a two hour lecture.

It's a conundrum that has perplexed both college professors and high school teachers

alike since the rise of the Internet. How to get the needed information to the students without losing their attention but also without turning the subject into a three ring circus in an attempt to keep the students attention? There is no easy answer but if being a teacher, professor, was easy, then anyone could do it, not just a select few. The question becomes then, how to introduce complex issues in U.S. History, such as modern day relations between Indians and whites, without losing the entire class within ten minutes of beginning the discussion.

The answer? Use one of the most famous, award winning authors in the mystery novel field. A person who has won the Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America (mysterynet.com), the Nero Award (nerowolfe.org), the Grand Master Award also from the Mystery Writers of America (mysterywriters.org), the Anthony Award from Bouchercon (bouchercon.info), the Agatha Award from Malice Domestic, Inc., the Macavity Award from Mystery Readers International and the Agatha Malice Domestic Award for Lifetime Achievement, as well as the Navajo Tribe's Special Friends of the Dineh Award (Haynes 75). A person who is known, world wide for his novels set in the Southwest of the U.S. with Navajo Tribal Policeman Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee as his main characters. Use Tony Hillerman.

The novels themselves will be a real throwback in time for students who know no other world than that of computers, Internet, iPods, cell phones for the first novel in the series was printed long before they were born or even before their parents were born, 1970. The first books in the series have no cell phones, no GPS, no tablets or wireless connections or anything else that students of today might recognize beyond that of cars and trucks. They might have a hard time wrapping their minds around such a society existing at any point in time, let alone in the near past. However, that disconnect from the present is what makes those early novels so very

interesting. The early books give students a look at what life was like *before* technology took over everyone's life and in that brief look, so much is said; about the Four Corners Area, the people who live, both Indian and non-Indian, the relationships all the characters have with each other and, most of all, the culture of multiple Indian tribes that is steeped into the land. Hillerman focused mainly on the Navajo but also included the Hopi and the Zuni in his stories. It is through the stories that the students will learn about the different tribes, their traditions and their differences.

A good place to start when approaching the stories in the classroom is to look at the background of the writer and where his inspiration came from. Why would someone want to set a mystery novel in a such a desolate landscape as the desert Southwest? Why use the Navajo as the main characters? Why use Indians at all? The answer is simple. Hillerman wrote about what he knew. He lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He lived among the people he wrote about. Being that when he started writing, back in the late 1960s, not even computers existed, let alone the internet, doing research was done the old fashioned way, talking to people, calling them on the phone, going to the library, living in the setting and among the people he was writing about, made the research that much easier.

His inspiration, Hillerman claims, came from an Australian mystery writer Arthur Upfield. Upfield wrote a series of novels set in the Australian outback featuring Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, 'Bony', of the Queensland Police Force, a half white, half Aborigine. In an introduction to a reprint of *A Royal Abduction*, produced in 1984, Hillerman writes of Upfield's description of the harsh lands of the Australian Outback and "...the people who somehow survived upon them...When my own Jim Chee (a later addition) of the Navajo

Tribal Police unravels a mystery because he understands the ways of his people, when he reads the signs in the sandy bottom of a reservation arroyo, he is walking in the tracks Bony made 50 years ago.”(Hillerman, iii). That Hillerman was inspired by an native Australian to write mysteries starring native Americans make his stories all the more compelling.

It is, without a doubt, that the landscape of the Southwest is just as much a character as Joe Leaphorn or Jim Chee. From Window Rock in Arizona to Shiprock in New Mexico to Tuba City back in Arizona, the depth and the breadth of the Southwest is on full display in all of the books. The areas most thought of as the Southwest, Monument Valley, Valley of the Gods, the Four Corners area, are all areas under control of the Navajo Nation and, as such, provide plenty of scenery for use in the books. An interesting avenue to take in class would be to assign specific regions from the books to students and have them research the area and the people that live in it. In this way, the students not only learn about places they have probably never heard of but they also learn about the people who live there and why they live there.

To learn about the Indians and the cultures that populate the Southwest is, quite possibly, the best reason to have students read the Joe Leaphorn/Jim Chee mysteries. All of Hillerman’s novels are steeped in the Indian culture; usually Navajo but sometimes Hopi and sometimes Zuni. Starting in the first book in the series *The Blessing Way*, the reader is introduced to one half of one of the major Navajo song ceremonies, the Enemy Way. The ceremony is done to counter the harmful effects of the ‘chindi’, a ghost left behind after the death of a Navajo or to kill off a troublemaker. Joe Leaphorn attends an Enemy Way ceremony at the beginning of *The Blessing Way*. Leaphorn attends the ceremony because of a body he found at the beginning of the story. The body is that of Luis Horseman. Horseman thought he had killed a man in a knife fight and

hid. When the man survives, Leaphorn spreads the word so that Horseman will come out of hiding. Unfortunately, Horseman is found dead, suffocated with sand. It is Luis' younger brother, Billy, who saw the man that killed his brother and stole his hat, as the symbolic scalp of the troublemaker, for the Enemy Way.

In the course of the story, it is learned that the 'trouble maker' is a Navajo named George Jackson, who was hired by another man, named Jimmy Hall, to keep people away from an Anasazi pueblo. Hall was collecting radar data from the missiles that were being tested on federal land, near the reservation. He had hoped to sell the information for a million dollars, a lot of money back in 1970, to whomever would pay for it. In the end, Hall fails, shooting himself as Leaphorn approaches his set up.

Jackson is from Los Angeles, part of a failed experiment in the late 1940's to 'civilize' Indians by moving them to modern cities and away from the deserts. He stands out from the other Navajo, attracting Leaphorn's attention, because he can not speak Navajo comfortably and does not know or understand the Navajo ways. In Jackson, we see what can happen when a society based on traditions is split up, divided and removed from those traditions.

In *The Blessing Way*, the first book in the series, we see the Navajo philosophy of keeping peace in one's life, shown by Leaphorn, up against the desire for money, demonstrated by Hall. *The Blessing Way* could be seen as a morality tale, i.e. this is what can happen when the desire for money overwhelms everything else, but it is first and foremost an excellent mystery followed by seventeen more novels that cover a vast array of topics including contrasts between different Indian societies and their beliefs, the differences between the white man's ways and the Navajo's ways. Anne Hillerman, the daughter of Tony Hillerman, has since picked up the mantle

left by her father and continued the adventures of Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, in the nineteenth book in the series, *The Spider Woman's Daughter*, released in 2013, introducing Jim Chee's wife, Officer Bernadette Manuelito, also of the Navajo Tribal Police.

Another avenue to use in class is the movies that have been adapted from the novels. The first novel adapted, *The Dark Wind*, did not do very well but it is available online through Amazon. The next three novels, *Skinwalkers*, *Coyote Waits* and *Thief of Time*, were shown on PBS's *Mystery!* program and can be found online through Amazon and other companies.

Tony Hillerman's novels are not the only ones out there that speak to Indian experiences, he just happens to be one of the most famous authors, owing that to his career that spanned nearly forty years. Another author, worthy of discussion, who, hopefully will be writing for just as long if not longer is Craig Johnson, author of the Walt Longmire mysteries. Both series are alike in that they use Indians and the life on Indian reservations in their stories. They are different in that the main character in the Longmire series is a white man, not an Indian. However, his best friend, is. Henry Standing Bear is a Cheyenne. Walt Longmire also does not work for the Tribal Police, he is the Sheriff of Absaroka County, located in Wyoming.

Simply because he does not work on an Indian reservation that does not mean he does not have to deal with the Indians living on the reservation that is located in the same county, for he does. The very first story, *The Cold Dish*, deals with a young Cheyenne girl suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome who is sexually assaulted by four members of the local high school football team. Two years after nominal sentences were handed out to the boys, the least repentant of the boys, is found shot to death. Longmire must search through a long list of suspects that includes his best friend, Henry Standing Bear, who also happens to be the second cousin of the girl and a

master sharpshooter. Longmire also must work the Cheyenne Tribal Police; Being that the Cheyenne Nation is a considered a sovereign nation within the borders of the United States, Longmire, as an outside law enforcement officer, is not allowed to walk onto the reservation whenever he wants to. The conclusion of the story is one that will have students talking about long after they have finished the book.

One good way to start a discussion in the classroom would be how European alcohol, i.e. whiskey, was introduced to Indians and the effect that has had on all the Indian tribes in the U.S. According to the National Institutes of Health, Indians are five times more likely to die from alcohol related causes (nih.gov). Why? What are some other health problems that Indians suffer from because of exposure to alcohol? What is fetal alcohol syndrome? Where does it come from? By using *The Cold Dish*, U.S. History, Biology and English Literature can be covered in a way that every student will be able to understand.

Like Hillerman, Johnson lives in and among the people he writes about. He lives near both the Crow and Cheyenne reservations in Wyoming and has used some of the people living on the reservations in the creation of some of the characters (craigallenjohnson.com). Unlike Hillerman, Johnson came to writing after a career in law enforcement in a "...large, metropolitan department in the east, which gave me insight into the procedural aspects of law enforcement..." (craigallenjohnson.com). He also grew up in a rural part of the U.S. and comes from a long line of storytellers. Johnson, according to the author himself, is just the first one to write the stuff down. Among his many awards is the Tony Hillerman Mystery Short Story Award in 2006 for his short story 'Old Indian Trick' (cowboysandindians.com), and Western Writers of America Spur Award in 2008 for *Another Man's Moccasins*.

Johnson also has at his disposal something that did not ever exist when Hillerman started writing. He has the internet and social media. The use of both in the classroom can make the learning of such complex concepts as ‘sovereign nations within a nation’, the status of federally recognized tribes in the U.S., just a little bit easier. On his website, craigallenjohnson.com, there is a list of every book he has written. Clicking on the book’s name brings up a synopsis, an excerpt, ‘case reports’, i.e. reviews and a ‘case study’, at the end of which are several questions for use in a discussion. After the reading the book, students can go to the website, download the questions, bring them to class and use them for class discussions. The questions are not easily answered either. They are questions that will cause the reader to think.

Here is the first question for *The Cold Dish*:

The Cheyenne and other tribes live within the borders of the United States. However, as Craig Johnson points out in *The Cold Dish*, the Cheyenne also constitute a sovereign nation, and the reservation stands politically and culturally as a world apart. Characters like Henry Standing Bear and Lonnie Little Bird must mediate between two modes of life and two identities. How does Johnson address the Indian characters' problem of dual identity? (craigallenjohnson.com)

For *The Cold Dish*, there are eleven discussion questions, covering everything in the book from the differences between an idealized West and the real West that people live in to Longmire’s relationship with his best friend, Henry Standing Bear to why the book is titled *The Cold Dish*. By using these questions that are freely given, both the History professor as well as the English professor will have ready made class discussions whenever they feel the class is need of a deeper discussion of specific topics.

One final area that Johnson has that Hillerman did not, is television, while Hillerman did have three of his novels turned into movies, he did not have a regular tv series. Johnson does. A&E optioned the Walt Longmire series to be filmed as a crime drama, titled *Longmire*. The first episode aired in June of 2012 starring Robert Taylor as Walt Longmire and Lou Diamond Phillips as Henry Standing Bear. Two more seasons also aired on A&E, becoming A&E's highest rated scripted drama (hollywoodreporter.com). Citing financial reasons, A&E did not renew *Longmire* for a fourth season. However, Netflix picked up the show and a fourth season will air in the summer of 2015.

The attention to detail that Johnson puts in his books is evident on screen, which is a bonus to those seeking to use the episodes in the classroom. There are some differences, of course. There are several characters in the tv show that are not in the books and some of the characters in the books are not in the show. Even the characters that are in both the books and the tv show are not entirely the same. The character of Victoria 'Vic' Moretti, one of Longmire's deputies is far more profane in the books than on television. Even in that difference, there is an opportunity for learning. The opportunities for compare and contrast between the book and the television show are endless.

An excellent idea, especially from the history perspective, would be to have the students take an Indian character from the television show and explain why he is the way he is. Two examples could be: Acting Police Chief Mathias, the police chief of the Cheyenne Tribal Police, and Jacob Nighthorse, a Cheyenne businessman attempting to build a casino that will benefit the Cheyenne with jobs and the proceeds of the casino, a nod to the many casinos owned by Native American tribes across the U.S. Students could also compare the Walt Longmire from the books

with Walt Longmire of the television show to see what the differences are between the two and why. That would be the perfect exercise for any English class.

The episodes of *Longmire* cover a variety of topics from the modern removal of Indian children from their Indian parents in order to be raised in supposedly better environments to alcoholism among Indians; part of *The Cold Dish* is used for an episode in the first season. One of the best episodes of the entire series, one that can be used for discussions beyond either History or English is an episode from the third season entitled “Miss Cheyenne”. It is an episode that, at its heart, deals with one of the many depredations visited upon Indian women, disguised as ‘help’, the forced sterilization of Indian women. A former Miss Cheyenne is discovered, at the end of the episode, to have murdered the sons of a doctor who sterilized her many years ago without her consent or knowledge during a minor operation (“Miss Cheyenne”).

A very simple question to ask the students is: Why? Why did the doctor decide to sterilize the woman? What does that decision say about the relationship between whites and Indians? To look at it from another angle, did the woman have to kill the sons of the doctor? Why not kill the doctor himself? Why not charge him with a crime? Such questions can lead the students to think of Indians and their lives in ways they had never thought of before.

Another part of the episode deals with the Miss Cheyenne pageant, a real pageant that takes place every year and was ‘borrowed’ by the television show. Real contestants in their exquisitely beaded costumes are shown doing the ceremonial dances that are part of the pageant. The television was so concerned with getting the authenticity correct that the show flew real contestants, costumes and all, down to where *Longmire* films in New Mexico (*Longmire*). When the students see the costumes and the dancing, they are seeing the real thing, which, opens yet

another avenue of exploration. What, exactly *is* the Miss Cheyenne pageant? How long has it been going on? Why was it created? What are the requirements? How hard is it to become Miss Cheyenne? All of these questions and more can be asked and discussed in the classroom as an extension of the Indian -White relations or Indian cultures. Every question discussed and answered with bring the student a new awareness of people they probably didn't think that much about, unless they had to.

When Tony Hillerman set out in the late 1960s to write mysteries set in the area he knew and loved, it probably never occurred to him that he would be writing those mysteries for close to forty years or that they would develop such a devoted following. The same can probably be said for Craig Johnson, except he has only been writing the Walt Longmire series for ten years. It most certainly never occurred to either man that their books, their mysteries would be used to broaden the knowledge of students, whose knowledge of Indians, unless they happen to be one, probably extends to the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving, if they remember that much from history class.

The beauty of using the Joe Leaphorn/ Jim Chee novels and the Walt Longmire series is that in using the novels, classes on Indian culture or U.S. History or English can come alive. No longer are the problems and issues of Indians just names and dates on a page. They are now people, with real problems, looking for real answers. The answers are all there, all in the pages of a good mystery.

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