DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 810 CS 214 772

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TITLE Headshrinker, Gay Cop, Culture Thief: New Male Roles in Tony Hillerman and Jonathan Kellerman.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (25th, Orlando, FL, April 7-9, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Homosexuality; Literary Criticism; *Literary Genres; Literature Appreciation; *Males; *Popular Culture; *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes
IDENTIFIERS *Detective Stories; Hillerman (Tony); Jacksonville University FL; Kellerman (Jonathan); *Mysteries (Literature); Postmodernism

ABSTRACT

In the area of male sex roles, the mystery novel is far ahead of society in general and thus presents the academic with a wealth of new male role models that demand inclusion in the postmodern canon. For a class at Jacksonville University ("Contemporary Detective Fiction") the classical male detective of "The Big Sleep" or "The Maltese Falcon" is first presented to students. The classical American detective character is rough, uncultured, even violent; he chain smokes, and contemporary social workers would call him an alcoholic. His sexual contacts are brief liaisons. Throughout he remains shrewd, calculating, objective and terminally cynical about the subject of women, and indeed, about everything. In extreme contrast, the postmodern male detective presented later in the course is an untrained amateur, who is often sensitive, caring, insightful, and socially aware. Two obvious examples of these trends may be found in the work of Tony Hillerman and Jonathan Kellerman. Their detectives are a caring, introspective child psychiatrist, a gay cop, and a Navajo police officer who is studying to be a shaman. Kellerman's Alex Delaware, for instance, is sensitive, socially involved, loving and passionate about his patients and family members and cynical only about the "bad guys." In fact, he has an enormous depth of sympathy for humanity and its problems. Similarly, at least part of the popularity of Hillerman's novels resides in their interesting, multidimensional portrayal of Hopi and the Navajo culture and characters as they conflict and complement each other. (TB)

Headshrinker, Gay Cop, Culture Thief:
New Male Roles in Tony Hillerman and Jonathan Kellerman

by Dr. Dick Gibson

Although perhaps not as sensational as the postmodern mystery's changing role for women, nevertheless, in the area of male sex roles, the mystery novel is again profoundly far ahead of society in general, and thus presents the academic with a wealth of new male role models that demand inclusion in the postmodern canon, not for political correctiness but because these new male roles are intrinsic to the genre. In the few minutes allotted me here I cannot present a real study of this area, but I will at least indicate the contrasts between classic and new detectives and offer two useful classroom examples of changing male roles.

I begin my class at Jacksonville University, called Contemporary Detective Fiction, by showing either The Big Sleep or The Maltese Falcon because the classical male detective has been forever etched into America's mind as either Humphrey Bogart or Robert Mitchum in the film noir of the 40's and 50's. This classical American character is a professional detective, and his ratty furniture and messy office are an American icon. He is rough, uncultured, even violent; he chain smokes, and contemporary social workers would consider him at least a borderline alcoholic. He is a pushover for Lauren Bacall, or whoever, but remains alone, his sexual contacts being brief liasons. Throughout he remains

shrewd, calculating, objective, and terminally cynical about the subject of women and, indeed, about everything.

In extreme contrast, the postmodern male detective is often an untrained amateur, a role reserved for female detectives in classical mystery fiction; in addition, he is often sensitive, caring, insightful, and socially aware, and he is often from a traditionally noninvolved group. Two obvious recent examples of these trends are Tony Hillerman and Jonathan Kellerman and their detectives: a caring, introspective child psychiatrist, a gay cop, and a Navajo policeman who is also studying to be a shaman.

Alex Delaware, Jonathan Kellerman's detective in a long series of novels, is a white male, but is otherwise almost the opposite of the classical detective. He is sensitive, socially involved, loving and passionate about his patients and his family relationships, and cynical only about "bad guys." In fact, he has an enormous depth of sympathy for the human race and its problems, especially as symbolized in the most vulnerable form--children. In my class, I use Kellerman's Over the Edge as the example because it most clearly shows Kellerman's concerns (and is also a thumping good page-turner). The story begins with Delaware being roused out of the bed by a phone call from an ex-patient who speaks in hallucinatory nonsense. Delaware leaves his beloved Robin in bed and drives miles to find the boy and help him. In this one chapter, the new male roles are obvious. He is first depicted in bed with a beloved, trusted lover, not a

stranger (for contrast imagine Sam Spade with a wife!) Delaware goes to find a child, not a paying client, and his social activism and deep personal caring sends him out into the night to rescue this extremely troubled, homosexual teenager not with any thought of reward or payment. He is strictly an amateur as a detective, a fact that the other important male character frequently reminds him.

This other important male role is Milo, a career policeman, a big, shambling bear of a man, but, in a stunning role reversal, he is gay, a member of still the most hated social group in American and a character that in classical mystery fiction was always portrayed as the sleaziest of twisted, sadistic bad guys. There is no sentimentalizing of gays here either; the plot moves through some pretty gamey gay lifestyles and includes both stereotypical and nonsteretypical gay characters. What is most interesting here though is that Milo, the gay cop, all too frequently functions as the cavalry. Delaware as amateur Knight-Errant oten gets into horrendous nightmare difficulties. The reader can nevertheless remain semi-relaxed, knowing gay cop Milo is also on the case, and will come riding in on his figurative white stallion to rescue Delaware at the last moment. For example, in <u>When the Bough Breaks,</u> Delaware has become the captive in an underground bunker; horrible death looms, the murderer cackles with pleasure when Milo, the gay cop, comes crashing through the skylight to rescue the good doctor and put the murderer away for good. Clearly, in his use of a sensitive,

loving, child psychologist as a detective, Kellerman is using and showing a new male role model, while at the same time, his use of gay cop Milo in the traditional role of professional crimefighter and cavalry-to-the-rescue is consciously ironic and far ahead of society's acceptance of such male roles.

In a very different kind of mystery, Tony Hillerman has been equally groundbreaking in his use of male characters and roles. With the exception of The Last of the Mohicans, and the unfortunate sterotype of Tonto as the Lone Ranger's sidekick, Hillerman's Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee are the only genuinely popular native American protagonists in American literature (How many of you, after all, have read Louise Erdrich or N. Scott Momaday?) But Hillerman's novels invariably hit the New York Times best-seller list, and The Dark Wind has become a major motion picture release. In my class, I use The Thief of Time and The Dark Wind for their beautifully drawn Native American characters and themes as well as for their tight plotting and intrinsic interest as mysteries (who can resist a story about finding the bones of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid?)

At least part of the popularity of Hillerman's novels resides in his interesting, multi-dimensional portrayal of Hopi and Navajo culture and characters as they conflict and complement each other in contemporary Four Corners area; and his criminals are almost too frequently Anglos, including the "culture thief" of my title. This reversal of traditional depictions of Native American and Anglo characters is in

itself a valuable corrective to generations of Americans raised on John Wayne/Rory Calhoun movies, wherein noble-hearted White settlers drive off the cruel, savage Indians (and no mention is ever made that the Whites are illegal intruders and the Indians are simply protecting their homes and lands).

But beyond this general reversal, even more interesting reversals appear in the male characters. Hillerman's Jim Chee is a Navajo policeman, also studying to be a Singer, a medicine man, and Hillerman weaves Chee's studies and his ritual songs cunningly throughout. (Again, for the full force of the contrast, imagine Sam Spade studying to be a priest in his spare time!) But Hillerman's use of these songs and rituals is never intrusive sociology but rather is intrinsic to the plot. For example, in the The Dark Wind, Chee is preparing himself to hunt for a criminal in the night by singing the Stalking Way songs, the purpose of which "was to put hunter and prey in harmony," a shockingly non-Anglo point of view. But since the Navajo have no concept of hunting for humans, Chee must adapt the Stalking Way by substituting the criminal's name in order for the criminal to willingly become prey. In the same book, a subplot concerning an old Hopi shaman protecting a sacred spring beautifully sketches out the difference between the shaman's Hopi and Jim Chee's Navajo culture.

Likewise, Hillerman's use of landscape, as seen through the eyes of Jim Chee, is probably unique in mystery fiction in

its profundity and pervasiveness. (Again, for sake of contrast, imagine Sam Spade singing a song of beauty to the rising sun!) In fact, Jim Chee's apprehensions of nature are so vivid that the landscape--the arroyos, mesas, snakes, and even rain--the entirety of nature becomes a character in the story, sometimes quite literally. For example, in both The Dark Wind and Thief of Time, nemesis comes not in the form of guns, courts, or legal justice, but rather is exacted by Nature itself. Likewise, in both cases, it is the landscape that rescues the detectives from the bad guys, not a sidekick--gay cop or otherwise. Chee's sensitivity to nature and his oneness with it both indicate new roles and social concerns for males and at the same time form one of the major attractions of Hillerman's novels.

By way of conclusion, let me sketch how I use these novels in class to draw the students' attention to the male role models in these authors. I ask the students as they read a novel to answer certain general questions in writing, such as who the narrator is, what concerns or biases does the narrator display, who the detective is, how does the author embed clues in the plot, and so forth. For each novel, I also have students' answer a second set of questions specific to that novel. In the case of Hillerman and Kellerman, the questions concern male sex roles, gay stereotypes and non-stereotypes, Native-American stereotypes and non-stereotypes and so forth. In class, the students discuss their answers to these questions in groups to formulate some

kind of group response; and when disputes arise, a frequent event, the disputees must present evidence from the text for their point of view. Meanwhile, I wander from group to group directing, asking for evidence, or just cheerleading if they're doing well. Then as a class, we discuss the group responses to try to come to some sort of synthesis. These sessions are remarkably lively, sometimes even passionate, because by this time even the shyest and least responsive students have formed opinions, have had to find and present evidence, and genuinely have something to say!

These discussions also present a basis for group and individual projects, additional reading, library research, and ultimately written and oral reports. For example, these two authors might lead students to comparison study of male role models in other mysteries, or to researched study in sociology journals for gay roles or Native American cultures, or to reading other novels by the same authors for more evidence, or some combination of all of the above. Clearly, the novels of Hillerman and Kellerman present new roles for men and in doing so present lively material for discussion of everything from the narrator's stance to homophobia to the use of imagery to change the reader's perceptions. As such, these novels also demand inclusion of these new male sex roles in the classroom and in the mystery canon, not in order to diversify the curriculum artificially, but because the genre itself <u>demands</u> it!