

# Los Angeles Times

November 17, 2002

TELEVISION

## The bestseller they couldn't sell

Robert Redford and son James spent years trying to turn Tony Hillerman's Navajo mysteries into movies. Then along came PBS.

By Susan King, Times Staff Writer

Even a major player like Robert Redford runs into problems getting films made. Never mind the Oscar, the Sundance Festival, the hits: For 14 years, he's owned the rights to the majority of the 15 mystery novels penned by Tony Hillerman revolving around the exploits of two New Mexican Navajo police detectives: Officer Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police and Lt. Joe Leaphorn.

Since "Skinwalkers" was published in 1986, Hillerman's books have consistently hit bestseller lists and sold millions of copies. But Hollywood didn't share Redford's passion for the police thrillers.

The actor-producer-director finally found a home for this pet project, however, thanks to his friendship with PBS President Pat Mitchell, who sits on the board of directors of Redford's Sundance Institute. While Redford was looking for an appropriate home for the Hillerman books, PBS was in the process of radically changing its long-running series "Mystery!," which has showcased only British-produced thrillers for the past 20 years.

Mitchell pushed the series out of its regular, Thursday-evening time slot last year, turned it into a limited series last summer and issued an edict that she wanted to introduce American programming on the franchise. American writers' work have been adapted for the series -- Elizabeth George lives in Huntington Beach -- but the stories have been set outside the U.S. At this time, no other American authors whose work is set in America are in line to be adapted.

Next Sunday, PBS is premiering Hillerman's murder-mystery "Skinwalkers" as an "American Mystery! Special."

The 90-minute whodunit features a Native American cast including Wes Studi as Leaphorn and Adam Beach as Chee, and was directed by Native American Chris Eyre ("Smoke Signals"). James Redford, son of executive producer Redford, adapted the screenplay.

"They [Hillerman's books] were so complexly difficult to mount," Robert Redford says. "There was no support for it. I had initially seen it as a series of films like the old Charlie Chan mysteries. Every 18 months this little movie would come out. They would not be big or pretentious. They would be humble little efforts that would deliver something diverse and new to an audience, but it would have to have humor and characters. So that's how it was conceived."

Redford did get Hillerman's "A Dark Wind" made as a feature film in 1991. He was executive producer, it was directed by acclaimed documentary filmmaker Errol Morris and starred Lou Diamond Phillips and Fred Ward as the American Indian policemen. The film, says Redford, wasn't any good and wasn't released.

"That was a false start," Redford says. "It was miscast. It was ill-conceived and I didn't think it was the right beginning for the series. It wasn't distributed."

Hillerman never saw that film but recalls that Redford asked if he wanted his name taken off the credits. "I didn't care really," the author says. "That book was very difficult to make a movie out of. It had a very complicated plot. So did 'Skinwalkers.' "

Redford acknowledges he was taken aback by how difficult it was to bring Hillerman's tales to the big screen "because of the perception of Native Americans not being commercial territory. Second, one couldn't see the larger picture of value of introducing two new characters who are fresh and audiences could adopt. They couldn't see that idea. It was very hard to convince people, so we lost a lot of years."

A few years ago, Redford did get a director interested in "Skinwalkers." Although he won't mention the director's name, Redford says, "He was very neurotic and was afraid of dry territory and wouldn't go down to the reservation because something about it made it uneasy to him. So it was pretty clear that the handwriting was on the wall and it was never going to happen."

Hillerman respects Redford's passion for his novels and never-say-die attitude. The author recalls that before Redford approached him, an independent producer had optioned one of his books.

"He didn't do anything with it, but he renewed the option and ended up owning the television rights to Leaphorn and Chee, so that meant no one was going to option the books," Hillerman says. "When Redford came along, he wanted to option them. So in effect, I had to buy the TV rights for those two guys, which he put up the money for. He optioned them and he kept trying, and so there we stood."

Passion for the culture

Over the years, Hillerman says, other movie producers approached his agent about obtaining the rights to his novels.

"I am not much of a movie buff and I thought if anybody makes a film, I'd rather it be Redford. Redford has a long-standing interest in the Southwestern tribes. He has a lot of good friends among the Hopis and other tribes too."

Hillerman really isn't surprised by the reluctance of Hollywood to embrace his novels. "When I tried to get my first novel published" -- "The Blessing Way" in 1970 -- "I had an agent who was selling nonfiction for me and doing pretty well with it. I wrote 'The Blessing Way' and she told me the only chance of selling it was to get rid of all the Indian stuff -- it slowed down the book. I told her that was the reason I was writing the book, so I just sent it off to an editor myself. I am not knocking her, she was a good agent."

Although Redford grew up in Van Nuys, he has long had a love of American Indian culture, and that was his road into producing the Hillerman stories.

"To be able to do a project that exposes something about our original culture boils down to a very simple equation for me. If you take the landscape and you take the culture, you can't separate them. Then you add the word 'tradition' and you have something unique," he says. "We have always looked at that culture in almost purely symbolic ways to satisfy the need of our Hollywood movies -- where the Indians are going to be the bad guys against the cowboys, the good guys. Lately, that has kind of changed, but it has always been a look at the culture in a sort of superficial symbolic way. So I thought what an opportunity here to present both the old and new [American Indian culture] because the new just hasn't been presented -- just a little here and a little there. This is all pretty new territory and it's amazing."

James Redford, who shares his dad's passion for the Southwest, wrote the first draft of the "Skinwalkers" script about eight years ago, and then another draft five or six years later.

"In between, it was confronting the reality that getting an all-Native American cast financed above a certain budget was just really hard to do. We are not idiots about the commercial realities. But I think what happens is that we all identify what we are convinced is a sure-fire thing. It was a bestselling author and a mystery genre. But I was sort of surprised there was as much resistance."

Especially, James Redford says, because of the popularity of such American Indian-themed movies as "Dances With Wolves," Disney's "Pocahontas" and Eyre's art-house success, "Smoke Signals," as well as the TV series "Northern Exposure," which featured many American Indian actors and examined the Native American culture in the American Northwest.

"I saw all of these indications it was time [for "Skinwalkers"] and room for this," he says.

PBS' Mitchell, a former producer at CNN Productions, first collaborated with Redford a decade ago on a TBS documentary on Native Americans.

She recalls that even then, he was talking to her about the Hillerman books.

Over the years, she adds, she would ask him what was happening with "Skinwalkers."

About two years ago, Mitchell was thinking of reinventing "Mystery!" by adding some American fare to the mix.

When she spoke with the general manager of WGBH -- the PBS affiliate in Boston that produces "Mystery!" and "Masterpiece Theatre" -- he expressed admiration for Hillerman's stories. "I said to him, 'I might be able to help you.' That's how it started. I called Bob right away."

'PBS stands pretty tall'

Mitchell says "Skinwalkers" should have a built-in audience among fans of the mystery genre "that might not necessarily be a built-in audience for material about Native Americans, which is traditionally challenging material to get an audience for. Having Robert Redford's name, having Tony Hillerman's built-in fan club is certainly going to help."

Eyre, who had developed "Smoke Signals" at Sundance, got involved in the project last year.

"The thing that Bob said to me, and really I meditated on quite a bit, is that he was interested in the books from the beginning because they weren't about anything but Indian characters in a contemporary setting and an interesting story. I think that's its biggest value. I was interested in doing a movie that was purely entertaining, and it was PBS and we were trying to reach a broad American audience."

Robert Redford feels the marriage of his sensibility and PBS' is a good one. "It coincides with the Sundance mission of discovering, honoring, nurturing and exposing new voices and new talent with diverse options," he says.

"If you look at America and what we are supposed to be, we are supposed to be championing the word 'freedom' and part of freedom involves the ability to be diverse," Redford says. "Sundance was founded 21 years ago to try to create a mechanism to protect [freedom and diversity] and nurture it. But you also need somewhere to put it. So it has been amazing for me to watch over the years the collapse or the shrinking down to nothing of the [TV] channels. PBS stands pretty tall."

Mitchell says they are hoping to do more Hillerman projects. "We have already commissioned another script, 'The Thief of Time,' and in fact Bob has even indicated he might want to direct this one."

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'Skinwalkers'

What: "American Mystery! Special: Skinwalkers"

When: Nov. 24, 9 p.m.

Where: KCET