Dance Hall of the Dead by Tony Hillerman

Two boys suddenly disappear, and Lt. Joe Leaphorn sets out to locate them. Three things complicate the search: an archaeological dig, a steel hypodermic needle, and the strange laws of the Zuni Indians. A riveting mystery from the bestselling author of Talking God and Skinwalkers.

My Personal Review:
Tony Hillerman has written a list of novels so distinctively unique that they could classify as a genre unto themselves. With their brilliant depiction of Native American cultures and life in our Western desert, these novels are much more than detective/thrillers. When I first read Hillerman, starting with one of his more recent books, I thought that his mystery, as a mystery, was rather slight. Nevertheless, I was captivated. And as I continued to read, I realized that the reader becomes so caught up in Hillerman’s world, so enamored by the ceremonials, religious practices and daily lives of these native people, that one can almost lose sight of the unfolding mystery. Not so, however, with this early award-winning novel. In this novel, suspense builds to a smashing crescendo, while his portrayal of the Zunis Dance Hall of the Dead ceremonial is perhaps the most fascinating of all such portrayals.

The story begins with Ernesto Cata, a twelve-year-old Zuni boy, proudly and diligently practicing for his role as Little Fire God, in which he will lead his village and dance an all-night attendance on the Council of the Gods. But, in a practice run, the boy comes face to face with a kachina. An initiated and well-tutored Zuni, Ernesto knows what it means to see a kachina. And suddenly the Little Fire God has disappeared, leaving behind a pool of blood to soak into the desert sand. Then his best friend George Bowlegs, a Navaho, is also missing and Joe Leaphorn of the Navaho Tribal Police is called in to find him. When Leaphorn himself sees a kachina, he remembers a Zuni friend telling him that no one sees this spirit of the Zuni dead unless he himself is about to die...And far out on the desert, searching for the Navaho boy who reportedly has gone in search of the kachinas, Leaphorn stumbles into a trap. Shot with a tranquilizer
hypodermic he is rendered physically helpless, unable to move a muscle. But his mind and senses are left super-alert and he can hear his stalker coming...
The story of the kachinas and the ceremonial held each year in honor of these benevolent spirits, so they will bring fertility to the seeds and rain to the dry land, gives this early novel a power that Hillerman has not since surpassed. But each of his books widens the window he has given us onto this Native world -- a view that enriches all Americans, while filling us with poignancy for all that has been lost to the American experience.

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