The late Tony Hillerman often compared being a writer to being a bag lady. Not a prophet. Not a visionary. A bag lady. Roaming the streets and alleys with a squeaky shopping cart that contains all her worldly goods, she finds a pile of rubbish waiting on the curb. A broken lamp. Moldewed paperbacks. A bag of stained baby clothes. Ah! But then something catches her eye. It’s a flour tin—bent, with a little rust around the base. Though the lid still fits tight, it is a thing of no value to anyone else, a thing of no apparent usefulness. Somehow, however, she feels that the object might be useful in some way, sometime, and so she wipes it off with her sleeve and places it in her cart. And what’s that? A spatula with a cracked handle. She doesn’t have a place to cook and no immediate idea what she will do with it, but, again, she senses that there might be some use for it at some point in the future, so she drops it into the cart beside the roll of electrical cord, the ferrule end of a broken cane, the chess set with only ten pieces, and the single ski mitten. Of themselves, they are all useless, of worth to no one.

Yet often, eventually, her pre-science is rewarded. A situation arises in which the usefulness of these discards becomes obvious. She lucks upon a carton of cigarettes in the parking lot beside a grocery. The flour tin becomes a vault to hide the extra smokes from her filching friends. The dowel becomes a pick to break up the earth and the spatula a shovel. It seems like destiny that these things should have come together in this haphazard way to make the protection of her cigarettes possible.

Writers are like this, said Tony. We wander through our lives, our brains squeaky shopping carts full of junk. This is not much different from people who don’t write. Writers, however, are always picking up stray objects in the faith that they may someday become useful. Many writers prefer not to think too much about their own creative processes and brush questions off, attributing their story creation to “inspiration”—the “I know it when I see it” theory of art, as if that would explain this mysterious process. Tony, however,
was not a dismissive person. In great
detail, he would explain how—as a
metaphorical bag lady—he put one of
his novels, A Thief of Time, together.
He saw an Anasazi pot in a museum.
He read about an archaeologist who
was alarmed at the looting of unpro-
tected archaeological sites. Bit by bit,
many such details would instinctive-
ly, not rationally, feel meaningful.
Many of them would ultimately be
useless, or need altering, but through
the mystery of the creative process
many of them would become the
perfect element of an engaging story.
Inspiration only comes when, in a
jumble of a jigsaw pieces from many
puzzles, you suddenly see a complete
picture forming. Gustave Flaubert
read a tiny newspaper article about
a doctor’s wife committing suicide,
and it coalesced with many other
things in his personal shopping cart
to become Madame Bovary. Nathaniel
Hawthorne’s journals contain notes
on various things he has heard or
read, along with a comment on the
order of “Something can be made of
this.”

This is the essence of creativity,
this recognition that something in the
spoiled petri dish has the potential
to be something other than a tainted
dish of agar. Perhaps what we call
talent or literary genius is mostly
a quality of readiness, an ability to
sniff out the value and interrela-
tionships among events and entities in
the world that most people merely
find to be nothing. Perhaps to be a
truly successful writer, one must be
prepared by circumstances of birth
or history to be able to see these
evasive connections. As a boy, Tony
was a day student in a school for
Native American girls. For him, a
Native American could never be “the
other,” but simply people with a
different way of looking at things.
He said he liked the way Indians
thought, and, to the extent it is pos-
sible to understand how anyone else
thinks, he tried to understand them.
He did not necessarily analyze it as
an anthropologist might, and he did
not condescend to it from an attitude
of superiority, but he absorbed it
by being genuinely interested and
respectful. People sensed his funda-
mental decency and opened up to
him. He was told secrets about sacred
Hopi rituals, for example, that he
never printed. In fact, those secrets
were published by others and avail-
able to the curious, but he refused to
violating the trust placed in him. Once,
I was lucky enough to have lunch
with him and a table of Native Amer-
icans who were not of the Navajo,
Hopi, and Zuni tribes—the tribes that
made the name of Tony Hillerman
familiar around the world. Nonethe-
less, to listen in on the conversation
was like eavesdropping at a family
lunch with its shared understandings
and references to things that could
only be understood in the context of
the insider.

Like Hemingway, Tony said that
most of what he learned about the
craft of writing, he learned in the
newspaper business: get to the point,
be clear, be accurate about your facts.
Aspiring fiction writers sometimes
don’t fully appreciate the value of
these Grub Street principles, thinking
that great writing is all about imagi-
nation and baroque flourishes, but
to be a great artist one must attain a
level of craft that allows the ineffable
to be shaped into a palpable form.
Only through the close and unpreju-
diced observation of our world—the
journalist’s strongest tool—is one
able to glimpse the dim outlines of
the ineffable. The most significant
realities are discovered while rum-
maging in the foul rag and bone
shop of the heart. Once, I noticed that
Elmore Leonard, a Mystery Writers
of America Grandmaster like Hiller-
man, had sat mostly silent at a large
table of mystery writers through a
long, chatty dinner. I wondered what
was bothering him, but a friend who
knew him better said, “How do you
think he writes such great dialogue?
He’s absorbing every molecule.”

Tony was also one of those writ-
ers who say they never outline their
plots in advance, but he admitted to
having many false starts in drawers.
Perhaps in many of them, he had just
not found the right object to crystal-
lize the rest of the story. Yet no one
should mistake this lack of outlining
for a freewheeling improvisation. He
was often asked how many times he
rewrote his books, and his answer
again revealed a meticulous sense of
craftsmanship. He would, he said,
begin a chapter, work for several
hours to get a few pages. Some writ-
ers are “putter-inners” who quickly
get the story down and then go back
over it, filling in the gaps. Tony was
the opposite sort, a “taker-outer”
who (like Hemingway or Hammett)
squeezed out every unnecessary
word, going for absolute clarity and
purity. When one of his books was
adapted for an audio tape, he lis-
tened to it and discovered that the
producers had removed a great deal
of his novel, though all of the story
seemed to be there. Rather than anger
him, this embarrassed him, he said.
If the words could be removed and
the story were as good, then those
words never belonged there in the
first place.
Like Hemingway, Tony said that most of what he learned about the craft of writing, he learned in the newspaper business: get to the point, be clear, be accurate about your facts.

Tony said his output varied, but it was not a lot and never a full finished chapter. So he would begin a chapter and the next day begin by proofreading and revising what he had written as a means to continue into the story. He would then add to it, but go back to the beginning on the first day. Sometimes, he said, the first part of a chapter was rewritten ten or a dozen times or more, whereas the end only two or three times.

When Tony wrote his first novel, a remarkably silly agent told him that if he just got rid of the “Indian stuff,” he might have a best-seller. “Nobody,” she said, “wants to read about Indians.” This brilliant assessment rivals the long-ago Hollywood agent’s assessment that Fred Astaire “dances a little.” Not only did Tony’s books sell, they spawned a host of writers trying to mine similar material from one or another of the many tribes. Novels like these often make no bones about the comparison, saying somewhere on the dust jacket that the book is just like Tony Hillerman’s. Of course, they aren’t. Sometimes there is knowledge of Native American ways, but rarely does the storytelling craft and sense of character accompany it. The warning on such novels should be “accept no substitutes.” When Tony passed away last October 26, New Mexico governor Bill Richardson ordered that the flags of be flown at half mast. How often does a writer receive such recognition? The self-described “bag lady” had pushed his cart a very long way, much farther than from his birthplace of Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, to Albuquerque.

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“Taker-outers” go back over their manuscripts with a scalpel, removing any unnecessary appendages, and tend to finish only a few pages a day. In fact, most professional writers are more tortoise than hare. Graham Greene wrote only 500 words a day, but 500 every day. Most writers I know say their limit is about 1,000 words, though they may have done more at times, and there are those exceptional writers who, like Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope, can do 2,500 or more at one sitting.

75 years ago in the pages of Books Abroad / World Literature Today

“I have been a writer for fifteen years and I am already tired of my profession. Besides, I have never earned a cent with my pen. The only thing I have gotten from it is the admiration of a few ladies. When I was a boy I used to enjoy wearing a wide-brimmed felt hat and affecting a lazy swing in my gait. I also liked to read a poem to a colleague, but he would always revenge himself by reading one of his own to me. Now that I no longer wear short pants I am indifferent to flattery or denigration. . . . So what are we to do? Very simple. Be a writer if you have nothing else to do, and then get a job in Congress, with a newspaper, or go to an asylum.”

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