

A TRIBUTE RECORDANDO A RUDOLFO A. ANAYA: FROM AZTLAN TO MICTLÁN

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ABSTRACT

This represents an intimate tribute to the New Mexican writer Rudolfo A. Anaya shortly after his death on June 28, 2020. He stood out as one of the more outstanding writers of the Chicano novel-especially the unforgettable *Bless Me, Ultima*-where he explored his region's (eastern New Mexico) stories and tales about regular people sometimes coupled with magical-real occurrences. He was deeply motivated and inspired by folkloric storytelling via legend and myth, thus tapping into ageless characters, owls, golden carps, subterranean lakes and the captivating nature of La Llorona. He also delved into numerous other genres, such as the fictional memoir, poetry, theatre, essay and children's literature. He was a quiet leader of Chicano/a literature: both as a creator, editor and promoter. His inquisitive imagination led him to explore many themes related to the cycles of life, for example, rites of passage, levels of *concientización*, aging and death and other universal truths the individual must encounter.

KEYWORDS: Quinto Sol Generation, Nuevo México Profundo, gifted storyteller, multiple awards, *Picardía*, shamanistic qualities, pied piper, myth and legend

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El Llano is mourning the passing of Nuevomexicano writer Rudolfo A. Anaya (1937–2020). Time became suspended, the wind stopped, the juniper trees sighed. His death marks a watershed moment in many ways: the Quinto Sol Generation just got smaller; his legacy is forever an indelible memory; and his fame transcends his *patria chica*. He was a child from the dry landscape of eastern New Mexico, where hardy people eke out a hardscrabble living, surrounded by an intensely ingrained tradition of Hispanos who go way back to

upon which Anaya situates his characters in search of harmony, much the way the protagonist Antonio Márez y Luna recounted in a semiautobiographical coming-of-age novel known worldwide, the unforgettable *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). Antonio represented the synthesis and reconciliation of two peoples and two generations, their religious and cultural beliefs, and their social practices. The Llano culture of New Mexico's eastern plains was the fountain that gave birth to Anaya's unique sensibilities; his youth in that world cultivated a deep appreciation for this rural culture, which never left him. He instinctively returned to relive the quest to relish, explore, and understand the New Mexican conscience because it nurtured his sense of place and purpose. In fact, most of his fiction, poetry, essays, and plays are products of such a quest, a *desdoblamiento* of his inner questions and doubts about life, tragedy and death, a sense of resolution and spirituality, and a deep awareness of humanity's dilemmas and paradoxes.

Born in Pastura, New Mexico in 1937, Anaya was clearly a direct product of his rural background in the Santa Rosa area, where the llanos or plains as memories of the past reign in the parched part of eastern New Mexico. His stories and novels and other works are extensions of that connection he had with his region. His iconic novel *Bless Me, Ultima* captures such an ambience of folk tales, curanderas, and magical-real happenings of a Hispano-Indigenous flavor. Many acknowledge that he was a key factor in the unprecedented acceptance of Chicano stories by the American literary mainstream and later by an international readership.

Anaya studied English at the University of New Mexico and eventually earned two Master's degrees in English (1968) and Guidance and Counseling (1972). In 1974, he was hired by the English Department at his alma mater, where he taught creative writing until his retirement in 1995. He was also very active in promoting Chicano literature, founding literary venues such as the journal *Blue Mesa Review*, while creating literary prizes for upcoming authors. For efforts such as these, he often received accolades as the dean and at times godfather of Chicano literature. Anaya was a trailblazer in so many ways by putting New Mexican Hispano-Indigenous culture on the map, influencing fields of literature, criticism, and history in the United States and overseas. His forte unfolds in his capacity to create archetypal characters, contemplate death, time and other features of

the cycles of life aside from the polarities in human behavior. In many of his works, he served witness to rural folks having to navigate the urban barrios at the same time he examined social issues related to railroad laborers and the trappings of urban temptations. Many of his writings contain autobiographical inferences that serve to unearth profound reflections about existence, a qualified philosophy of life, the dynamics of power vs the powerlessness, the politics where tradition and modernity clash, and the discovery of the myth of Aztlan as an alternative to the powers that be. He garnered a widespread following among his readership for his boldness in insinuating the need to confabulate a philosophy of harmony and balance along with the fundamental need to define new avenues of social justice.

Of course, his long list of literary works in multiple genres denotes a prolific writer of unmatched talents, endless curiosity, and profound courage. Anaya tended to produce literature in distinctive groupings. The first sequence was a trilogy about place and myth in his *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Heart of Aztlan* (1976), and *Tortuga* (1979). A second was a pre-Columbian exploration into the Chicano indigenous background in *The Legend of La Llorona* (1985), *The Lord of the Dawn: Legend of Quetzalcoatl* (1987), and, to some degree, *Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert* (1996) which seeks a philosophy of harmony in the modern world. Later, he pursued a predilection for the mystery or detective novel first explored in *Albuquerque* (1992), followed by a series of mystery novels based on the four seasons such as *Zia Summer* (1995), *Rio Grande Fall* (1996), *Shaman Winter* (1999), and *Jemez Spring* (2005). Another literary vein explored folkloric renditions combined with science-fiction in *Curse of the Chupacabra* (2006), *Chupacabra and the Roswell UFO* (2008), and *Chupacabra Meets Billy the Kid* (2018). He also made an invaluable impact in children's literature with his award-winning *The Farolitos of Christmas: A New Mexico Christmas Story* (1987), *Roadrunner's Dance* (2000), and *The First Tortilla* (2007). In addition, he effectively explored philosophical topics on love and death, for example, in *The Old Man's Love Story* (2013), and he has also excelled in writing plays, poetry, essays, and personal chronicles (for instance, *A Chicano in China* (1986) or what Patricia Geuder calls "a chronicle of oneiric dimensions"). *Y muchas más.*

Anaya's literary works have been extremely well received in general among readers and critics, although the acclaim has not always been

unanimous. For instance, some school districts in the United States voted to ban or burn *Bless Me, Ultima* for its supposed propagation of witchcraft and sorcery and its profanity and “obscenity.” Other detractors questioned the novel’s mythic qualities as fanciful or anti-historical constructions as if he should concentrate on social realism, but he always tried to keep his feet on the ground while listening to the imaginative tales of his people. It is noteworthy to mention that the first modern Chicano works to receive international acclamation up to and through the 1970s were *Bless Me, Ultima* and theatrical productions by El Teatro Campesino. During his career, Anaya was the recipient of some of the most prestigious awards, such as El Quinto Sol Literary Award, the American Book Award, the National Humanities Medal (presented by President Barack Obama), the NEA National Medal of the Arts Lifetime Honor (presented by President George W. Bush), and twice the New Mexican Governor’s Public Service Award, and many others.

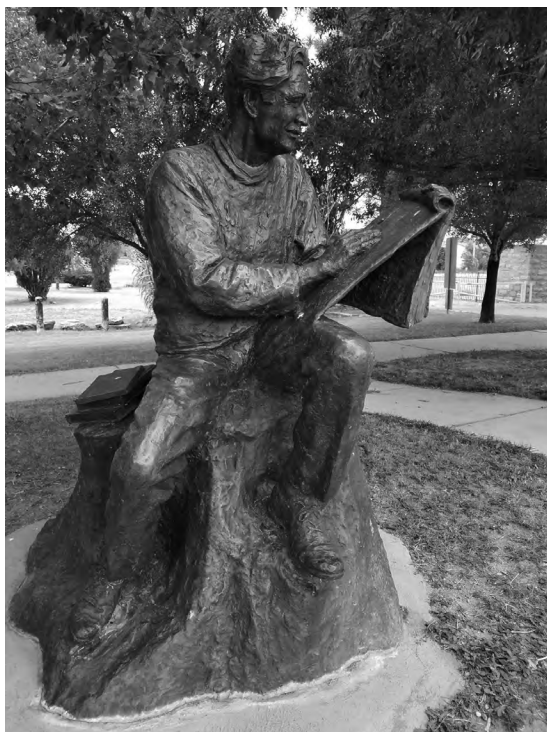


Image 2. Statue of Rudolfo Anaya in Santa Rosa, New Mexico, reading *Bless Me, Ultima*

Rudy Anaya was a man of simple tastes (he delighted in red chile enchiladas at Barelás Café in Albuquerque) with profound convictions about the potential of Chicanos/as as a people and culture in the United States and the world. As a gifted storyteller, he masterfully created compelling stories and trenchant characters, oftentimes with shamanistic and poetic qualities, that represent the struggle between conflicting cosmic forces, usually ending with an optimistic outlook toward self-realization. In fact, most of his works embrace a search for wholeness, opportunity, justice, and goodness, as Ultima instructed Antonio. His writings inspire because they express universal truths and values recognized and felt by readers from all walks of life.

Talking to Rudy was often a memorable event, for he possessed oracle qualities in his wisdom, a passion for writing, and a legendary generosity in promoting young writers. Rudy liked a good laugh *con picardía*. I loved calling him because his answering machine seemed to share his humor: “Can’t answer the phone right now because I’m busy writing stories...” He was always promoting books, education, and reading like an exemplary pied piper. He was a consummate conversationalist, a friend with a long memory, a genuine gentleman with grace and dignity. His humility was overshadowed only by his greatness. Anaya has now forever returned to the realm of his imagination, the world he sought in life to capture glimpses of owls, golden carps, black stones, subterranean lakes, blue guitars and La Llorona. Rudy has left us but he will be with us *por y para siempre*. *Que en paz descanse nuestro amigo, hermano, maestro*, Rudolfo A. Anaya.