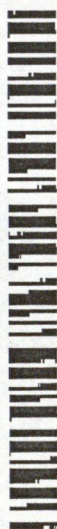


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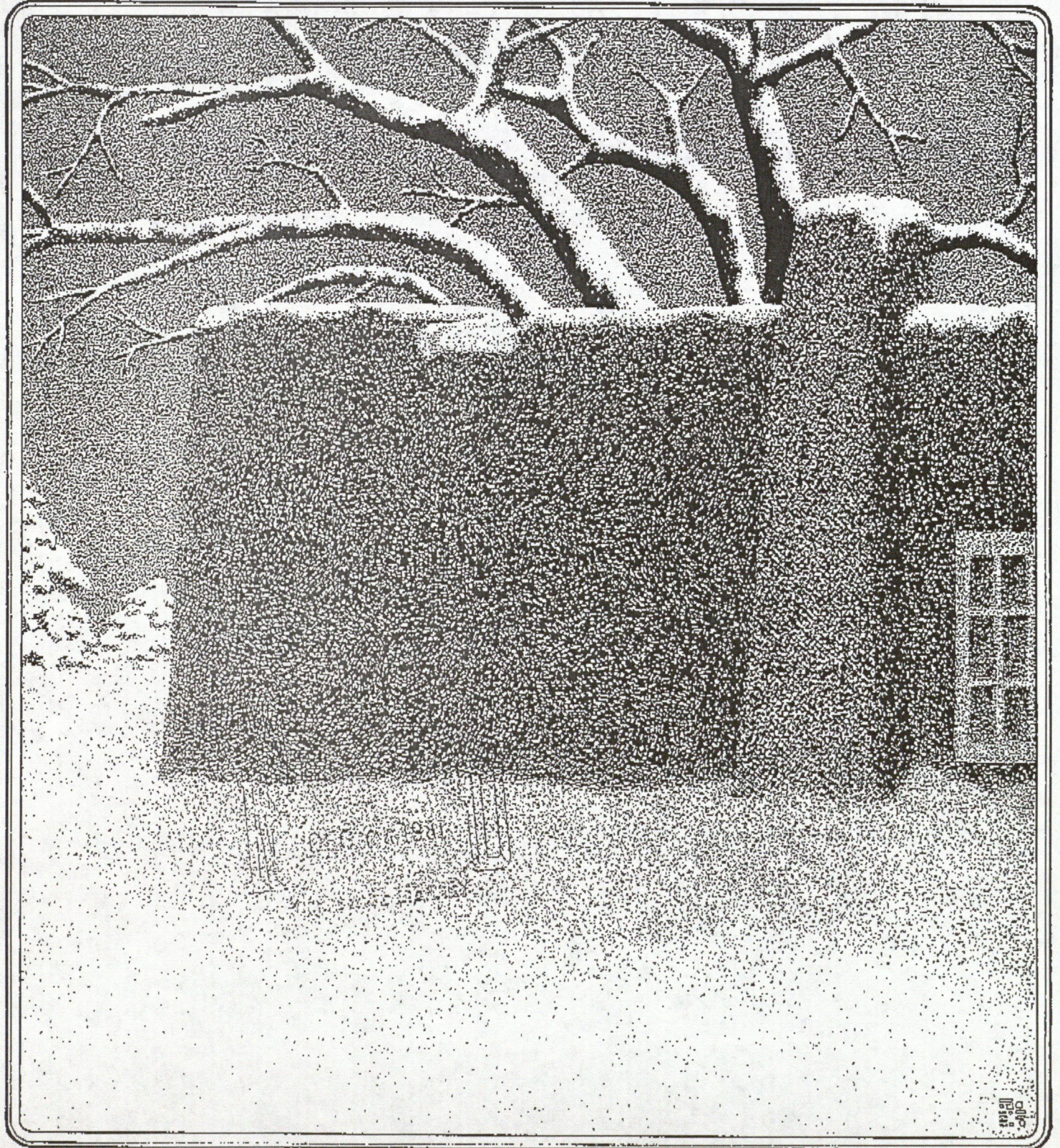
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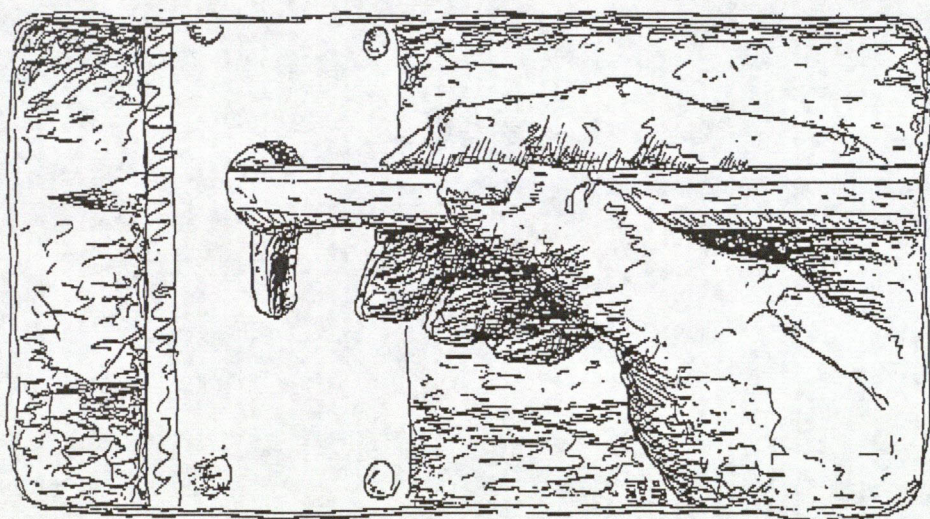
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The Courage of Expression

by RUDOLFO A. ANAYA

The following is an amended version of an address delivered by Rudolfo A. Anaya in September, 1981, to the New Mexico Council of Teachers of English.

—Editor

Censorship is on the rise. We are witnessing it today, and its clearest, most pressing evidence comes from our schools, where a struggle is being waged over the books our young people will be allowed, or not allowed, to read.

Today's teachers, sensitively placed in the midst of the struggle, not only have to guide and influence the creative imagination of young people, they have to deal with many community and national pressures. We know from history that the forum of the classroom should be the place where all ideas can be discussed and debated, and yet teachers are feeling the new and present pressure of sectarian groups which are springing up everywhere. Bigotry is one of the pressures they face. A concerted

movement is under way in this country to forge the people into one group which follows only one drummer. Special interest groups—often religiously motivated—are out to destroy the freedoms inherent in the forum of education. These groups propose that deviation from a preconceived norm is not to be allowed. These small groups, and they are small, fewer in power and numbers than we credit them to be, are mobilized to restrict the basic freedoms of expression which form the social and political contract of this nation. I say we must join together to resist the goals of these narrow-minded groups.

Literature is the reflection of humanistic thought. Teachers of literature must, because of our present time and circumstances, now make their commitment to the future of free thought. I suggest that this is the most pressing commitment they have to make in the decade of the '80s.

Political or religiously motivated groups which try to exclude the literature of any individual or group of people from the classroom also seek to stifle new and challenging thought. And history teaches us that when one group controls the thought of a people, that nation is bound to die a self-inflicted death.

We must recognize that an educational system is also a system of politics. The educational system of this country is entrusted to pass on the values of a society, and in that sense it is a conservative, closed system. But the same educational system is entrusted to pursue knowledge, and in that sense it is an open system. I am afraid that today we have the rise of powerful and narrow interest groups who want to close the system until it reflects only one narrow view of the world. We do not have at work a Moral Majority, but a Minimal Minority.

I could give countless examples of their force at work in our society. Teachers know there is a rise in the censorship of books—books branded as unfit for reading are pulled from library shelves and classrooms. In science the creationists' view is assailing the very idea of free inquiry. There are groups with money who use computerized mailing lists to mobilize communities against textbooks which do not fit their sectarian view of the world. And the threat is felt as educators comply with the wishes of such narrow groups. Publishers accept with resignation the threat of censored literature, and their capitulation to these groups means a watering down of free and challenging thought. Controversial subjects become taboo. Certain authors are excluded. And finally a narrow sectarian philosophy which aligns itself with a particular moral view evolves, and this fascist ideology quickly sets itself in place to use the schools for attaining its goals.

But not in New Mexico, you may say. Not here. News of censorship and book burning always reaches us from out there. Here, we are a civilized people. We have learned to appreciate our diverse cultures. We practice the good life and believe that our shared cultural contexts make a richer and more interesting society for all.

I am not so sure. Book burning has come to our backyard. In February of this year, the *Albuquerque Journal* carried a story which reported that in the New Mexico State Legislature a state senator, who is also a member of a board of education in this state, testified that she had personally seen to it that copies of *Bless Me, Ultima* were taken out of the high school of her district and burned. This is what that newspaper story reported on February 28, 1981. On that day, 1984 arrived in New Mexico.

But what is even more frightening is

that this same thing is happening in many localities throughout our country. There are numerous examples of special interest groups forcing schools or libraries to destroy or remove books. And an intimidated, liberal public stands quiet as these bigots and book burners have their way.

The burning of a book is a highly symbolic act. In my judgment, it is next only to the horror of burning human beings. It is a heinous act which has no place in a free society. A voice of concern and indignation should arise when such an act occurs. Teachers of literature, who value history and its literary birthright, should be the first publicly to condemn such an act. Their influence will be felt if they take a firm stance in opposing any group which would censor and burn books. I believe a society which allows books to be burned is a society which is afraid, and to be ruled by people who live in fear is to spread the contagion until there is truly no hope for the future.

To burn a book is an attempt to intimidate. I assure you, I have not been intimidated. But it is also an attempt to intimidate the very process of creativity and inquiry. History teaches us that those who would rule along their narrow doctrinaire lines first set out to destroy the literary works and thought and language of a people. If they are allowed to bury the work of one writer, to erase the history of one people from the face of the earth, then there is no turn-

ing back. They will not be satisfied until they create, in their distorted image, the horror of their oppressive world.

In New Mexico, in the Southwest, throughout this country, quite the opposite should be happening. I have served on national boards which deal with contemporary writing. I know that there is a renewed interest in the writings of the regions and ethnic groups of this country. Women are writing more than ever, and we are grateful for their ideas and perceptions. People who were disenfranchised of access to literary production are now publishing works in alternative and small presses. The might of the big publishers is no longer equated with literary excellence. The minority and ethnic groups of this country have rich traditions to share with us if we but seek out their works.

In New Mexico we have a diversity of cultures. But all too often we have not sought out and we have not used the works of our own writers. We have been indoctrinated to believe that the regional perspective in literature demeans the literary work. What nonsense! The basis of the works of our writers is the imagination and the life of our people, and the works achieve universal qualities because of their portrayal of the human spirit.

This is true of many of the works by our own Southwest writers. It is time that all the schools of this state begin a sound program which presents the works of our writers, writers from all

the ethnic groups which compose New Mexico. That program will not detract from a study of American literature; rather it will be an integral part of the literature. Our writers have produced and are producing American literature. And the program can then rightly move to a national and world stage.

I said in a talk a few years ago in California that the coordinates of a true American literature have not yet come together. As long as we exclude the writings of any group of people which formed this country, then we still do not know American literature in its broadest sense. Let us begin here, to introduce the writers of our own region, and to build from there. That is the challenge today.

If I have one message, it is that we must not only be vigilant, it is that we must be involved. If we stand quietly aside and forsake our freedoms and the freedoms which the study of literature brings to us, then we become a part of the problem. Those who only look on while books are burned are as guilty as

those who do the burning. Those who do not speak out for liberty, and freedom of expression, for the dissemination of ideas, for the right for serious works of literature to be judged in the open forum of the classroom and the communities of this country, help the enslaver forge the chains.

Right here in our state, in our communities, in our schools, all of us can help preserve the freedom of expression. We must not be afraid; we must not feel threatened. We can all help and sustain each other. And we know we are justified in our efforts, because our guiding motive is not the control of the minds of people, it is the enlarging and freeing of the minds and spirit of people.

Rudolfo A. Anaya is the author of Bless Me, Ultima which was awarded the Second Annual Premio Quinto Sol national Chicano literary award in 1971. Mr. Anaya teaches literature and creative writing at the University of New Mexico.