

Anaya, Rudolfo -
"Tortuga"

New Mexico English Journal



FANTASIAS: DREAMS AND ILLUSIONS

**Spring, 1990
Volume 5, Number 1**

New Mexico Council of Teachers of English

Feature Articles

Magic Realism in Rudolfo Anaya's *Tortuga*

— Jeanette C. Smith

It is clear that some of the works of native New Mexican author Rudolfo Anaya have been influenced by the fantasy/alternate reality of magic realism. Anaya himself says of his masterwork *Bless Me, Ultima*:

I was focusing on that stream which is called magical realism in Latin American literature, and saying that within the context of our culture, there exists this very interesting, fantastic world that can be woven into reality (Farrell 19).

However, does Anaya's later novel *Tortuga* remain within this stream? Let us discuss *Tortuga* in terms of various general features of magic realism. Despite attempts to define this literary mode, from Angel Flores' 1955 study to the present time, a precise definition has not been determined. In his prologue to *The Kingdom of this World*, Alejo Carpentier has distinguished the more realistic *realismo magico* from the more fantastic *lo real maravilloso*, a distinction to which we shall return at the end of this discussion (Carpentier 12). Nevertheless, all magic realist literature has certain similarities.

These features include a sense of isolation, an unexplained combination of fantasy and reality, precise yet distorted visual imagery, a sense of mythic past, and exaggerated comic effects.

In Winter's Tale:

An ordinary white milk wagon horse suddenly soars into the air in a Manhattan theater (Helprin 13).

In One Hundred Years of Solitude:

Blood trickles from a dead man's ear, down the street, under a closed door, curving to avoid the dining room table,

directly to the feet of the man's mother (Garcia Marquez 135). When this man's father dies, a light rain of tiny yellow flowers falls all through the night in a silent storm, covering the roofs, blocking the doors, and smothering the animals who slept outdoors (Garcia Marquez 144).

Does *Tortuga* exhibit such spectacular flights of fantasy? Does it demonstrate the general characteristics of magic realism?

The world of Anaya's crippled children's hospital and the small southern New Mexico town of Agua Bendita, overshadowed by Tortuga Mountain, is as insular as Helprin's Manhattan or the Macondo of Garcia Marquez. The narrator, a paralyzed teenager from "up north," consummates his isolation by sending a message for his mother not to visit him. From this point, the hospital is his world. We see it through his eyes as a place of pain and repression, a "holiday in hell" (Anaya 111) from which he alone escapes to tell his tale. This isolation, this cosmic solitude, is a key feature of magic realism.

Another characteristic feature is the use of a unified narrative voice combining fantasy and reality without explaining it. Helprin's hero Peter Lake and the inhabitants of Macondo accept the marvelous as commonplace. Similarly, Anaya's narrator, nicknamed "Tortuga" both after the mountain and after his shell of a body cast, describes the ordinary physical reality of the hospital, its inhabitants and employees, and the mountain, but shifts effortlessly into hyperbole. He sees the mountain as a giant paralyzed turtle; he sees Ismelda, a nurse's aide, as the high priestess of the mountain.

A concept shared by magic realist literature and magic realist art is precise yet distorted visual imagery, what has been termed a "super-charged landscape tradition" (Hancock, "Magic Realism" 4). Anaya's delineation of the darkness of the hospital is in deliberate contrast to the light glowing from "within the mountain as Tortuga seemed to lift his head into the setting sun" (Anaya 21). This image is as visually memorable as the shower of tiny yellow flowers. It is possible to visualize *Tortuga* as being set in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, with its hospital, or in Las Cruces, New Mexico, with "A" or Tortugas Mountain within view of its hospital, with the desert to the north, and the Gila to the west. However, Anaya's sharp focus upon Auga Bendita, the hospital, and the mountain transcends the imagery of a real southern New Mexico community.

Tortuga also exhibits the characteristic collective sense of a folkloric or mythic past seen in Macondo and in Helprin's Manhattan. Anaya's character Salmon, who has resided in the hospital longer than any one else, in the "vegetable patch" filled with iron lungs, is the high priest of the mountain and guardian of the hospital's oral tradition. He speaks to Tortuga through dreams:

How clear are the events of the day I killed the giant river turtle. I tell you this because since that day I have been a storyteller, forced by the order of my destiny to reveal my story (Anaya 22).

Tortuga's fellow patients and the hospital workers also communicate to him the folklore of the community and of the mountain, particularly the myth about the healing powers of the hot springs under the mountain and the myth that every time "the mountain moves somebody in here moves" (Anaya 15).

Exaggerated comic effects provide a welcome contrast to such sobriety, often combining with the quality of caricature found in magic realist characters. One night Garcia Marquez' lovers Amaranta Ursula and Au-

reliano daub themselves head to toe with peach jam and are "awakened by a torrent of carnivorous ants who were ready to eat them alive" (Garcia Marquez 411). Tortuga too has his night of slapstick passion when a group outing to the local movie theater to see *Frankenstein* becomes an orgy behind the seats, with bandages, braces, crutches, and wheelchairs thrown in the aisle. Crippled Cynthia, whose appearance had initially frightened Tortuga, replaces Ismelda as the object of his affections at the moment the monster falls in love on the screen (Anaya 150). A bizarre scene, it is yet consistent with Salomon's advice to Tortuga:

Love was the only faith which gave meaning to our race across the beach. The path of the sun was the path of love. I needed to love (Anaya 150).

While *Tortuga* exhibits general features of magic realism, we must now ask whether it is a magic realist novel. It is clear that the work does not possess the *lo real maravilloso* elements of Helprin or Garcia Marquez. There are no flying horses, no fantastic trickles of blood. The mountain does not literally move. Rather, I see *Tortuga* in the tradition of the more realistic *realismo magico*. It is Anaya's use of language, the "magic of words" (Vassallo 10), that adds the pinch of wonder to the reality of the hospital and the mountain, magic occurring "from the sparks generated between the possibilities of language and the limitations of physical nature" (Hancock, "Magic Realism" 5).

Our hero Tortuga sheds his shell, escaping from physical and spiritual paralysis, "the man who would not only feel the misery of the hell we lived in, but also return to sing about it" (Anaya 134). In this novel, a celebration of the magic of the human spirit, Rudolfo Anaya indeed moves mountains.