

RUDOLFO ANAYA: 'The Chicano Worldview'

BY WILLIAM CLARK

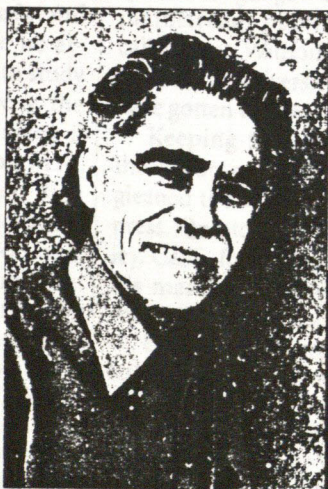
FROM THE LARGE, east-facing windows of his home high on the mesa west of Albuquerque, N.M., Rudolfo Anaya commands a sweeping panorama of the Rio Grande Valley. The city where this legendary 57-year-old Chicano author has lived his varied and prolific literary life spreads out below, threaded by the sinuous *bosque*, the forest of giant cottonwoods, that flanks the Great River.

"River of dreams, river of cruel history, river of borders, river that was home," Anaya calls this artery of water, so vital to the arid landscape of New Mexico, in his novel *Albuquerque*. It is a region that, with its unique, centuries-old Hispanic culture—part Spanish, part Native American—he has made inimitably his own.

Anaya's father was a *vaquero* from Pastura, a horseman who worked cattle and sheep on the big ranches of this region; his mother came from a farming family in the Hispanic village of Puerto de Luna in the Pecos Valley. The windswept wildness and solitude of the *llano*, the plains, and the settled domesticity of the farm—"Those are the two halves of my nature," says Anaya, a short, wiry man, quiet and reserved, with curly graying hair and a thick mustache reminiscent of Pancho Villa's that dominates his strong, rugged features, the face of the *ranchero* he might well have become.

"Much is in the blood," he continues in his soft, resonant voice, "because the blood has memory, memory that has been imprinted, encoded, from the past—the whispers of the blood are

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stories. The rational mind works in tandem with that information; in fact, its job is to bring that to light, to tell us who we are." Beyond the valley and the city's eastern sprawl, the Sandia Mountains rise in a sheer escarpment that marks the point of the sun's daily rebirth, an event that has deep spiritual significance for Anaya.

The sun is indeed the central symbol of *Zia Summer*, the new novel from Warner Books—

"I had to find my own voice"

and this versatile writer's first outing in the murder-mystery genre (*Forecasts*, Apr. 10). The *Zia* is an ancient Pueblo Indian sun symbol, and it provides key clues in Anaya's tale of Albuquerque PI Sonny Baca, who, in solving the murder of his cousin, confronts a terrorist cult and the threat posed by the transport and disposal of nuclear waste.

Zia Summer is the second of a quartet of seasonal novels that began in 1992 with Anaya's *Albuquerque* (the original spelling of the city's name), whose protagonist, a young barrio boxer in search of his true Chicano identity, helps thwart a grandiose real-estate development scheme that threatens the traditional life of the region's old Hispanic and Indian communities.

Sonny Baca will return in *Rio Grande Fall*, the already-completed third book in this series, due out next year from Warner. That mystery deals

with, among other matters, the pressing social problem of homelessness, Anaya says. He prefers not to speak of the final novel of his quartet, which is now in progress, beyond noting that Sonny will once again do battle with the eco-terrorist villain he first encountered in *Zia Summer*.

Quest for a Cultural Identity

But, underpinning Anaya's most recent novels—with their new emphasis on contemporary social issues and the more accessible style he says he's consciously adopted—are the themes he has consistently probed since his first book, the seminal Chicano coming-of-age novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, appeared in 1972: spirituality and healing; Chicano tradition and myth; the sacredness of the land; the role of shaman-like figures as mentors and guides; and the quest for personal, communal and cultural identity.

Though published by a small academic press, *Bless Me, Ultima* sold more than 300,000 copies in 21 printings before Warner finally brought out the first hardcover edition in 1994. Told with lyric magic realism, steeped in the traditional lifeways and folklore of New Mexico's rural Latino culture, the novel established Anaya's reputation as one of the founding fathers of Chicano literature.

Addressing matters that mirror not only Anaya's own life but also the experience of Chicanos throughout the Southwest, his next novel, *Heart of Aztlan* (Editorial Justo Publications, 1976) brought a rural *Nuevo Mexicano* family to Albuquerque and depicted their painful struggle to maintain the values of their Mexican-American culture within the new context of the urban barrio. His third novel, *Tortuga* (Editorial Justo, 1979), examined pain, loss and healing in a different way—through the experience of a boy hospitalized with a severe back injury like the one Anaya himself endured as a teenager, the result of a diving accident.

"I think of myself as a novelist," Anaya muses, "but from the beginning, I wanted to try many things." In the dozen years between *Tortuga* and the appearance of his next full-length novel, *Albuquerque*, he published a volume of short stories, *The Silence of the Llano* (Quinto Sol, 1982), two novellas and several plays; produced a book-length Chicano mock-epic poem and the travel journal *A Chicano in China* (Univ. of New Mexico, 1986); and wrote a steady stream of essays. One of his children's stories of that period, *The Farolitos of Christ-*

mas, is due out from Hyperion in December, and Warner has just released a wide-ranging anthology, *The Anaya Reader*.

This productive career has brought Anaya more than a score of honors, among them the Premio Quinto Sol national Chicano literary award for *Bless Me, Ultima*, the PEN-West Fiction Award for *Albuquerque*, and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. His lectures and readings have taken him throughout the U.S. and far abroad—a long way from the tiny village of Pastura on the plains of east-central New Mexico, where he was born, and the nearby Pecos River town of Santa Rosa, where he grew up.

Anaya's family left rural New Mexico when he was in the eighth grade and moved to Albuquerque, where he attended high school and went on to study English and American literature at the University of New Mexico, earning a bachelor's degree in 1963, then an M.A. in 1968. Though he began writing *Bless Me, Ultima* in 1963, he was also teaching in the Albuquerque public schools and attending graduate school part-time; he spent seven years perfecting that book. He was working, he says, "in a vacuum," not yet involved with the Chicano movement then gaining momentum in the Southwest, of which he would soon become one of the most eloquent voices.

Work Without Precedents

"With as much literature as I'd read and studied," Anaya recalls, "when it came time to treat my own experience, other novels in the American experience didn't work as models. I had to find my own voice, my own expression, my own forms, working with my own materials, values, culture. What I set out to do—which is what every writer does—was to create a universe, one that had its roots in the *Nuevo Mexicano* experience. I just plunged into the material and tried to give it form, structure. I wanted to take those people I had known and make them breathe again."

History would show that he succeeded masterfully, but getting this new work out—couched in the bilingual, Spanish-English form that Anaya pioneered and has pursued throughout his career—proved, to say the least, difficult.

"It was extremely hard," he says. "I sent the book to dozens of trade publishers over a couple of years and found no

interest at all. The mainstream publishers weren't taking anything Chicano and we had nowhere to go. For us, living in a bilingual world, it was very normal to

anthologized work has become standard fare. That long commitment to education connects with the idea of mentorship that is a consistent theme in his writing (most of his protagonists have spiritual guides) and which is, he says, "in a sense, the role of the writer."

Anaya has provided a groundbreaking model for a whole generation of Latino writers, and his UNM students have included the likes of Chicana novelist and playwright Denise Chávez. "There seems to be a new wave in Chicano literature and visual art—it's booming, and Chicanos are coming into

their own," Anaya says, with one of the grins that frequently light up his face, hints of the strain of humor that pervades his work. "Any community, to be known, needs many voices to describe it, and that's what's happening."

For two or three hours each weekday morning, Anaya, working on his computer, continues to add his voice to that vibrant chorus, pursuing his life's work in the adobe home he and Patricia—his wife of 29 years, who is also a writer—designed for themselves two decades ago. In his small study, a glass door faces the Rio Grande Valley, and one book-lined wall bears a row of *santos*, the statues of saints that are so much a part of *Nuevo Mexicano* life.

"The place where I work is very important, hard to duplicate," he says. "It's where all the characters gather; they're used to this little room, comfortable visiting me here." For Anaya, the process of fiction is "part meditation, part bringing up ideas that have been fermenting, but a lot of it involves characters speaking to you and forcing you to write their stories. There's no preconceived story line—the characters come alive and say: here's my story."

In this "centered, sacred space," Anaya will, he says, typically draft a novel within a year, then revise extensively through five or six drafts—each of them read by Patricia, his "frontline editor"—as he hones language, fills out characters, sharpens his focus. "What I've wanted to do is compose the Chicano worldview—the synthesis that shows our true *mestizo* identity—and clarify it for my community and for myself," Anaya says. "Writing for me is a way of knowledge, and what I find illuminates my life." □

RUDOLFO ANAYA SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE ANAYA READER

Warner, paperback, 1995

ALBUQUERQUE

Warner, paperback, 1994

BLESS ME, ULTIMA

Warner, paperback, 1994

allow Spanish into a story written in English—it's a process that reflects our spoken language—but [in approaching mainstream publishers] I was always called on it. Without the small academic, ethnic and university presses, we'd never have gotten our work published intact."

Keeping faith in his work through those years of rejection, Anaya ultimately gleaned the address of one such obscure press, Quinto Sol Publications in Berkeley, Calif., from a magazine, and sent off his manuscript—which was accepted immediately and published in 1972.

But, even as his reputation as the "godfather" of the Chicano novel grew, Anaya would continue to publish exclusively with small presses for over two decades. In 1992, he met New York literary agent Susan Bergholtz and, in part because of her longstanding advocacy of Latino writers, signed with her—the first and only agent he's ever had. Together, they developed a proposal for a package of books, a mix of old and new work, and, by late 1993, Bergholtz had settled a series of contracts with Warner for the publication of illustrated hardcover, paperback and Spanish editions of *Bless Me, Ultima* and a paperback edition of *Albuquerque* in 1994, as well as *The Anaya Reader* and the three novels featuring Sonny Baca. That major recognition at last placed Anaya, after 20 years, squarely in the world of mainstream publishing, with access to the broad public he's always wanted.

Throughout his career, Anaya supported his family and his writing through work as a teacher and academic counselor. From 1974 until his retirement in 1993, he was a professor at the University of New Mexico, specializing in creative writing and Chicano literature—a field in which his own widely

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ABSTRACT: Chicano author Rudolfo Anaya, who recently made his first outing in the murder-mystery genre, is profiled. Anaya's most recent novels--with their new emphasis on contemporary social issues and a more accessible style--are underlined with the themes he's consistently probed since his first Chicano novel.

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