

Dennis Quinterley
Anaya, Rudolfo - "Tortuga"

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Anaya's *Tortuga*

For those who have read Rudolfo Anaya's other two novels, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) and *Heart of Aztlán* (1976), his latest novel, *Tortuga*^{*}, will seem familiar not only in its themes but also in its narrative style. Nevertheless, this will not detract from the pleasure of reading this book. The reader will be caught up in the same fervor that made him read each of the other two novels by Anaya in one sitting.

Tortuga presents the agonizing and tragic world (in the Greek sense of the words) of one who is trapped, be it by a physical impediment or a mental barrier. The cripples (as they are called in the book) find themselves isolated from the world. The hospital and its bureaucratic complications keep them separated from the real world and force them to communicate among themselves. Upon being separated from the world, an outside world of which the reader is told little, the patients at the hospital enter into relationships that create a fictional world rich in characters and symbols. The characters in *Tortuga* are presented in the novel by a first person narrator who sometimes speaks to us consciously while awake, using the logic and time of the real world, and sometimes while dreaming, using oneiric logic and time. These two story lines come together frequently throughout the book until they finally evolve into one. The dream story line includes many predictions and philosophical statements made by Salomón, who is known as an avid reader and oracle. The conscious story line consists of dialogues that the patients have among themselves and that the narrator repeats to us from his vantage point as witness and protagonist. In the end, as the two story lines mesh, we discover the fulfillment of Salomón's predictions to Tortuga in his dreams: that he would one day leave the hospital without his cast and thereby experience the symbolic metamorphosis from turtle to lizard, walking on his own. Tortuga's last letter from his mother, in which she tells him that he is coming home and that Crispin has left him his guitar, is more proof of the correctness of Salomón's predictions.

In this last chapter, where Crispin appears, we become aware of the continuity of the plot uniting Anaya's three novels, thereby forming a trilogy in

^{*}Rudolfo A. Anaya, *Tortuga* (Editorial Justa Publications, Inc.: Berkeley, 1979).

which each character is part of the fictional and vital world of Rudolfo Anaya. Crispin, like Tiresias, is the blind man that can see into the future. Previously, in *Heart of Aztlán*, he was the wise man who steered Clemente Chávez toward social protest and a deepening interest in the mystical intrahistory of Aztlán. Now he passes the legacy of music on to Tortuga.

Full of symbolism, *Tortuga* once again emphasizes a philosophical search, this time not the Chicano's search as was the case in *Bless Me, Ultima* or *Heart of Aztlán*, but rather that of man in general when he finds himself in situations where this search is continuous, eternal, and never successful no matter how persistent he is in his efforts. Tortuga cannot explain why these people are wilting away like vegetables in this hospital. He cannot find the answer in Danny's religion nor in his dream-like deliriums when he asks himself rhetorical questions about the moral reasons for their illnesses. The world put them there as if they were society's rejects; it put them there in the middle of inhospitable land that is like the lagoon of the Styx (the desert) that Charon (Filomón) crossed when transporting the dead to Hades (the hospital). Just out of their reach was a majestic mountain that crazed them just as it crazed Jerry, a Navajo who jumped out of a window in search of the illusion of a more perfect contact with nature only to die trapped by that which he was seeking.

During his convalescence the narrator remembers moments in his life: the girls who were with him at his First Communion, the appearance of La Llorona, and lullabies. He does not think of his family much. He only has a few letters, and he thinks these are full of lies. He is an orphan like the rest of the patients in the hospital, anonymous beings with names such as Tuerto, Mudo, Sadsack, Buck, and KC. Fantasies rather than real facts are remembered.

Tortuga is a make-believe story told in first person by a story-teller. It presents the intertextuality typical of metaliterary texts of modern literature in which the story is told through two parallel story lines, in this case one based on the fantasizing mind of the narrator and the other based on that of Salomón, a creation of the first narrator, who has allegedly read one million books. Like the new Latin American narrative, especially that of Cortázar and Rulfo, it shows us that imaginary worlds are limitless and that even with similar mystic traits, new narrative situations can be created that will be attractive to the reader without being repetitive or monotonous.