

Rudolfo Anaya

National Humanities Medal

2015



WHITE HOUSE CITATION

For his pioneering stories of the American southwest. His works of fiction and poetry celebrate the Chicano experience and reveal universal truths about the human condition—and as an educator, he has spread a love of literature to new generations.

Rudolfo Anaya's first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, was published in 1972, just as the Chicano Movement was taking root in the national consciousness. This community of Americans of Mexican descent was affirming its unique cultural identity through the cultivation of art, theater, music, and literature. *Bless Me, Ultima*, a novel about a young boy struggling with competing expectations and values in post-World War II New Mexico, resonated with Chicano readers. Anaya was subsequently anointed the godfather of Chicano letters. Yet *Bless Me, Ultima* also appealed to wider audiences, becoming a national best-seller. It is both a favorite of the educational curricula and one of the most challenged titles because of its honest treatment of religion and spirituality. "I write what I was meant to write," Anaya says. "And *Ultima* is unstoppable."

With more than 40 books to date, Anaya, too, has had a remarkable journey. He was born in 1937 in a rural New Mexico town and pursued an education. He and his late wife, Patricia, became literacy advocates, establishing scholarships for disadvantaged youth and a writer's residency in Jemez Springs for working writers.

After *Bless Me, Ultima* came two more novels and a series of story collections. But Anaya's next breakthrough came with the 1992 publication of *Albuquerque*, set in the city Anaya has called home since 1952. The novel's protagonist navigates tensions between the spirituality of the past and the edgy modern era, discovering his true identity and saving the political fate of his hometown. Arguably, this fictional hero set the stage for another of Anaya's memorable characters, Sonny Baca. The four Sonny Baca murder mysteries highlight the New Mexican landscape and culture, giving particular detail to the unique festivities, foods, and folk beliefs of the state that became known as "The Land of Enchantment." Anaya's distinctive magical realism underscores the region's rich imagery and the mythology of its Native American, Spanish, and Mexican heritages. "It's my responsibility," Anaya says, "to bring this knowledge to American literature."

Anaya's body of work also includes six plays and a dozen children's books, including the perennial favorite *The Farolitos of Christmas*. In that story, a young girl named Luz decides to make lanterns, farolitos, to make sure that the sicknesses in her family don't interfere with having a special Christmas celebration.

His most recent title, the novel *The Sorrows of Young Alfonso*, was released in 2016.

Anaya has received two Governor's Public Service Awards from New Mexico, the American Book Award, a Kellogg Foundation fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) literature fellowships, and the NEA National Medal of Arts Lifetime Honor in 2001.

Speaking to the honor of the National Humanities Medal, Anaya becomes pensive. "I've been thinking a lot about what this recognition means, and I've decided it's not just about me...this award is about the people of New Mexico."

About the National Humanities Medal

The National Humanities Medal, inaugurated in 1997, honors individuals or groups whose work has deepened the nation's understanding of the humanities and broadened our citizens' engagement with history, literature, languages, philosophy, and other humanities subjects. Up to 12 medals can be awarded each year.