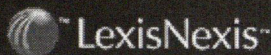


Anaya, Rudolfo - "Bless Me, Ultima" - Censorship - Banned Books



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Eighth-graders shocked by banning of "**Bless Me Ultima**"

Fourteen-year-old Johnny Valtierra discovered himself amid the pages of Rudolfo Anaya's "**Bless Me Ultima.**"

The Jimmy Carter Middle School eighth-grader had not found too many books he liked to read until his language arts teacher, David Salmon Ornelas Jr., assigned "**Ultima.**"

And when he read about the protagonist getting teased in the school lunchroom for eating beans and tortillas, he thought "that's me."

"I really didn't get into books until now," Valtierra said. "Until (my teacher) introduced this book."

He was among Jimmy Carter eighth-graders who were shocked when they read that a Colorado superintendent had **banned** copies of the book from a high school there.

"I didn't see anything worth banning," said 15-year-old Rebecca Martinez.

It wasn't so much the issue of censorship, Ornelas said, but that the book that touched these students -- the majority of whom are Hispanic -- was being forbidden in another school.

"I just thought that it was weird," Elliot Archuleta, 13, said. "They were high school students."

Ornelas had read the book as a senior in college and wondered why it took so long in his education to finally get to something that had an Hispanic voice.

"It was a shame I waited until then to read about my own culture," said Ornelas, who once taught Anaya's nephew.

Ornelas has taught the book to students from seventh through 12th grade in his last 12 years as a teacher.

His eighth-graders had just read excerpts of the book and were wrapping up projects to display in the library when they learned of the ban last week.

"I was shocked," Ornelas said. "I was angry."

But instead of voicing his own concerns, he thought he would ask his students to react.

Student voices

Thirteen students recently wrote letters to the Albuquerque Journal protesting the Colorado superintendent's banning of the book.

"The book really depicts what it's like growing up," Jennifer Moya wrote in a letter to the Journal. "Rudolfo really understands how it is like. From kids cussing when they know it's wrong to getting picked on in the lunchroom."

Kevin Alvarado, 13, said Wednesday that compared to the "crappy award-winning books" teachers assign students, "**Ultima**" is one of the best he's read.

"It's wrong," Alvarado said of the ban.

The Norwood superintendent -- who admitted he had not read the entire book himself -- gave his high school's "**Ultima**" books to a parent to destroy after that parent complained about offensive language and paganistic practices, according to The Associated Press.

The superintendent, Bob Condor, has said the parent threw the books in the trash headed for a local landfill.

According to the Montrose (Colo.) Daily Press, the ban has resulted in protests to return the book to Norwood High School's curriculum as well as Anaya recommending the superintendent write a book report.

Condor has since apologized to students at his school and others in the community who were outraged by his actions. He has vowed to personally pay for new copies of the book once a review committee from the Norwood School District approves the books for reinstatement.

Another attack

The book has been questioned before, and is ranked 75th on the American Library Association's 1999-2000 list of most frequently challenged books.

Anaya, a University of New Mexico professor emeritus who was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Bush in 2002, depicts a 7-year-old boy and his life in 1940s New Mexico with his Roman Catholic mother and **Ultima**, a curandera who uses herbs and magic to heal.

"This book reminds kids of their families," Ornelas said, "of their background."

Ironically, most of the Jimmy Carter students have yet to read the entire book because Ornelas has been unable to obtain copies for his class for the last two years due to a lack of funding. Ornelas copied 10 of the book's 21 chapters that dealt with the issues of youth and Hispanic culture.

Moya's mother bought her the book as a present so she could read it in its entirety.

Brianna Grajeda said she's read the book four times -- twice for school, and twice on her own. She also made her father -- a Mexican immigrant -- read the book.

"He really liked it," Grajeda said. "I liked the adventure that was in it. It wasn't something that I had to read."

Some of the students say they recognized the curandera in the book as people they know, such as Valtierra's aunt.

As for language, the students say any of the profane words in "**Ultima**" could be heard on their campus between classes.

The book is on the approved reading list for Albuquerque Public Schools seventh-graders and is also taught in high schools, APS spokesman Rigo Chavez said.

All copies of the book -- except for some study guides -- were checked out of the Jimmy Carter school library Wednesday.

A trip to the school's library found a lack of Southwestern-based fiction writers for the preteen audience.

While Ornelas's teenage students say they prefer the genre of S.E. Hinton's "The Outsiders," there appeared to be no writings for juveniles from a Latino point of view.

"We don't really have any," said Jimmy Carter librarian Barbara Moore.

And the Hispanic-themed books the school has are either picture books, such as the American Girl "Josefina" series, or ones with a mature theme for high school students and adults, Moore said.

The one juvenile fiction book she had set in New Mexico -- Kokopelli's Flute by Durango writer Will Hobbs -- was from an Anglo's perspective, based on the book description.

The 'Ultimo' compliment

"I was shocked and speechless when I heard that they had **banned** the book called '**Bless Me Ultima.**' ... How can any one place, town, city, state, or even country ban a book?"

-- Brianna Grajeda "But the whole focus, the whole point, is that good is greater than evil. The book does not in any way encourage any paganistic practices. Nor does it encourage foul language. It merely is just a boy's story when his life is changed forever when he met **Ultima.**"

-- Jennifer Moya "Hi, my name is Johnny Valtierra and I am a Chicano. To me it's interesting how you can read a book that reflects your life. Not only actions and thoughts but also racial features."

-- Johnny Valtierra

BANNED IN COLORADO

GRAPHIC: PHOTO BY:GREG SORBER/JOURNAL PHOTO: Color Jimmy Carter Middle School eighth-graders Jennifer Moya, left, Johnny Valtierra and Brianna Grajeda wrote letters to the Albuquerque Journal in response to the Norwood, Colo., ban on Rudolfo Anaya's book, "**Bless Me Ultima.**" PHOTO BY:GREG SORBER/JOURNAL PHOTO: b/w Jimmy Carter Middle School student Elliot Archuleta wrote a letter to the editor about "**Bless Me Ultima**" -- **which was banned** in a Colorado high school. PHOTO: Color Brianna Grajeda's display describes the characters in "**Bless Me Ultima**" by Rudolfo Anaya. PHOTO: Color ORNELAS: Asked students for their reaction

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