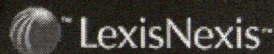


Anaya, Rudolfo - Bless me Ultima - Censorship - Banned Books



Home Sources How Do I? Site Map What's New Help

Search Terms: **bless me ultima banned**

[Edit Search](#)

[Print](#) [Email](#)

[Document List](#) [Expanded List](#) [KWIC](#) [Full](#)

◀ [PREVIOUS](#) **Document 8 of 125.** [NEXT](#) ▶

Copyright 2005 San Antonio Express-News
San Antonio Express-News (Texas)

February 13, 2005, Sunday , METRO

SECTION: S.A. LIFE; Pg. 1K

LENGTH: 1297 words

HEADLINE: Banning of classic book puts district in spotlight ; Some Colorado schools bar '**Bless Me, Ultima.**'

BYLINE: Elaine Ayala

BODY: Rudolfo Anaya is 67 and still living in what he calls "the center of the universe," his beloved Albuquerque, N.M. From his home, where he's writing a play for the city's tricentennial celebration next year, he sounds calm as he answers the phone.

When asked the question he has been getting repeatedly in the last few weeks, the author says he doesn't get worked up about yet another banning of his 1972 classic, "**Bless Me, Ultima.**"

"Usually I realize that it's one person, or a very small group, or one parent that has not read the book," he says. "And they either find a word or passage and judge the book by that. So, I kind of stay cool about it."

But cool is the last word one would use to describe how others have taken news of "**Ultima's**" banning by the Norwood Public Schools in southwestern Colorado, a small, rural, predominantly white community with about 300 students.

Late last month, Superintendent Bob Conder pulled the award-winning book, on first lady Laura Bush's list of recommended books, from a teacher's ninth-grade curriculum. This, several Colorado news reports say, after the teacher alerted parents about the book's "adult language" and gave them the option to select another book. A parent protested the book's profanity and paganism, prompting the ban.

The superintendent has since issued an apology, saying he **banned** the book "without enough information," and admitted he hadn't read it. A week ago Friday, a group of Norwood students staged a sit-in at the school and read Anaya's book, widely considered a classic of Chicano literature and American letters in general.

Some students apparently traveled miles to purchase copies. The original books appear to have been destroyed.

Conder did not return several calls last week, and another school official would not comment on the record. But Margo Roberts, editor of the Norwood Post, has written about the controversy and taken calls from newspaper and TV journalists across the country.

The story broke several weeks ago when Roberts received an anonymous call saying the school was burning books. At one point, she adds, a janitor was asked to destroy the two dozen copies. Later, she says, a parent asked to be allowed to trash them "in the landfill."

This is hardly the first time "**Ultima**" has come under fire. It ranks 75th on the American Library Association's list of the 100 most frequently challenged books. Among them are Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," Alice Walker's "The Color Purple," J.D.

Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye" and Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird." "**Ultima**" centers on the life of a New Mexican boy in the '40s and his relationship with a curandera (healer) who comes to live with his family. The novel takes on themes such as indigenous versus Catholic spirituality. "It's a reflection of my childhood and what the community was like and the culture was like, and what it's still like. So, the idea of the curanderas was part of the culture and still is. We have more now than we did then." Anaya says his book includes "strong language" and is a "young adult novel" written for high schoolers and beyond.

A few San Antonio literature professors say many of their students already have read the classic. "This is only anecdotal," says Yvette Benavides, assistant professor of English at Our Lady of the Lake University, "but I suspect that I'm not unique in this. They have almost always already read Anaya, and it was their first taste of Chicano literature."

"Intolerance is rearing its ugly head all over this country," says Ellen Riojas Clark, UTSA associate professor of bicultural-bilingual studies. "Have these people read anything else on the school's reading list like 'Beowulf,' 'Romeo and Juliet' or any other of the classics and let them remain on the list?"

Sandra Cisneros, author of "The House on Mango Street" and "Caramelo," agrees. "'**Bless Me, Ultima**' is an American classic, not a Chicano classic. It's part of American letters, to look at it any other way is to be ignorant of arts and letters. There's nothing in there that they haven't heard in their own homes or own schoolyards."

The superintendent's decision is all part of a wave of fear among people from the president on down, Cisneros adds. Instead of reacting with calm and intellect, people are reacting with fear. "It's all part of the global stupidity we're seeing."

And, she adds, "what you call witchcraft is what I call spirituality."

Benavides thinks the book's title character, **Ultima**, frightens or mystifies readers unacquainted with the topic. "Historically, this is a strand of the study of Mexican American literature and culture that is perceived even today with a certain amount of skepticism," she says. Challenging or banning a book because of this theme "comes from a kind of fear or ignorance of ... folk remedies or healing. Those who are unfamiliar perceive curanderismo as a kind of brujeria, or witchcraft. ... They don't respect it as something that has been a science for so many for a very long time."

"My theory," adds San Antonio poet Pablo Miguel Martinez in an e-mail response, is that "these debates are generally frothed by opponents' fear of otherness."

"It's fascinating, though not surprising to me, that next to titles like 'Lolita' and 'Catcher in the Rye,' the books most often targeted for condemnation are by writers of color, and lesbian and gay writers. Those who fall into the category of what I term 'gated community readers' are entirely missing the point of reading literary works. We who read 'promiscuously' are drawn to creative expressions - the beautifully, honestly wrought varieties - because they transport us to worlds we do not inhabit, and allow us to enter lives far different from ours."

Mono Aguilar, an English instructor at San Antonio College, remembers that a similar controversy erupted at an Edgewood school in 1997. In that case as well as the most recent in Colorado, "the theory that the language isn't age appropriate doesn't fly," he says. "The reality is kids speak that way. Adults see a problem because they think their kids are more innocent than they are."

Bryce Milligan, publisher of Wings Press, takes a more philosophical view in an e-mail. "Books make people think. To some, that simple truth may seem too obvious to bother pointing out; to others, it is one of the most frightening realities they may ever encounter. A book is where two minds - the author and the reader - grapple with ideas. Neither one has The Truth, but A Truth emerges from the struggle. The result is that lives are changed. With truly great books, very occasionally, the world is changed."

"Rudy Anaya's '**Bless Me, Ultima**' is one of those great books. That is why every year or so, it frightens someone into attempting to take it away from students."

The editor of the Norwood Post has some blessings to count. The town librarian was seen wearing a pin that reads, "I Read **Banned** Books," she says, and students who staged the sit-in are "fearless."

But she's also worried. School officials have accused her of inaccurate reporting and lying, she says, and while the superintendent says children won't be punished for the sit-in, "the cheerleaders were forbidden to

cheer at the next game," Roberts says. "Teachers are afraid."

Back at the center of the universe, however, Anaya is calm.

"I trust the community to do what's right," he says.

Like Antonio in his book, he believes what **Ultima** tells him. "He has to trust in goodness and that that can overcome any evil in his life."

eayala@express-news.net

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: EXPRESS-NEWS FILE PHOTO : Writer Rudolfo Anaya says he refuses to get worked up over the recent banning of his book '**Bless Me, Ultima.**'

LOAD-DATE: February 14, 2005

◀◀ [previous](#) **Document 8 of 125.** [next](#) ▶▶

[Terms & Conditions](#) [Privacy](#) [Copyright](#) © 2005 LexisNexis, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All Rights Reserved