

book talk

NEW MEXICO BOOK LEAGUE

8632 Horacio Place NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87111 (505) 299-8940

Vol. XIX, No. 5
5 issues per year (\$7.50) irregularly published

November 1990
ISSN: 0145 627X

STAND UP AGAINST CENSORSHIP ANYWHERE IT OCCURS

by Rudolfo A. Anaya

I awoke the morning of Feb. 18, 1981, to read in the *Albuquerque Journal* that the Bloomfield School Board had ordered the burning of my novel, "Bless Me Ultima." That memory came vividly to mind in February 1990, when I read that the mural which Frederico Vigil painted at St. John's College in Santa Fe had been vandalized and destroyed.

The self-appointed censors are at it again.

In 1981, a Bloomfield school board member who was also a senator in the state Legislature was quoted in the paper as saying, "We took the books out and personally saw that they were burned."

Why would anyone in their right mind burn books? How did my novel threaten these book-burners? The book burning didn't make sense, but acts of censorship never have. Even after the shock wore off I couldn't believe this act of desecration had occurred.

Being raised poor in New Mexico taught me the value of books. I grew up treasuring the few books I came across; I grew up believing my liberation was in books. If liberation is in books, did those who burned books oppose my liberation? I believe in the freedom of expression and the communication of ideas. Did they burn the book because it carried a reflection of my ethnic community? I couldn't believe that. New Mexico is the state where major cultural groups have interacted and lived in harmony. We respect the freedom of expression in art of all the cultural groups.

It was gratifying to me in February 1981 when people stood up and expressed indignation about the book burning. People from around the country wrote petitions protesting it, but for me the shock of the event never wore off. I quickly learned, however, that what had happened to my novel was not an isolated incident. Censorship was on the rise in this country.

That same year I attended the National Writers Congress in New York and testified before a committee of writers and editors who were documenting and opposing acts of censorship in this country. I remember the long line of people waiting to testify spread from the room into the hall.

Why did they burn your book, people asked me. Someone doesn't like my message, I answered. The characters and images I used in my writing all came from my life in the Hispanic community. For the first time in our history, a novel from that community was being widely read and accepted in the schools—and the reaction was to find excuses to burn it in Bloomfield. Someone did not want the

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voice of our Hispanic writers in the schoolrooms.

Books bring ideas for change and challenge. That's why people who see the world only in one image burn books. Books describe other possibilities and different thoughts, and books give people power. That's why we read: to taste and know the world of ideas. Books enlarge our experience, acquainting us with the thoughts of others.

I don't have to convince serious thinking New Mexicans of the value of books. But I do want to emphasize that the burning of "Bless Me Ultima" was an overt sign of a cancer within. In a society where books are burned or art is smashed, the cancer has surfaced.

The making of art in all its varied aspects is the making of cultural artifacts. Art as a form of expression and communication reflects society and that expression from all corners of our society rightly belongs in the classrooms along with the ideas and artifacts of science and technology.

But art contains the personal ideas and message of the artist, and those who guard narrow points of view don't like the multiplicity of ideas. We don't have to like all artistic endeavors, but we do have the responsibility to recognize that even in the most controversial piece of art or literature, the artist renders a new perception of the world. We do not have the right to censor that expression.

Recently the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency which provides fellowships for artists, has been under attack by narrow-minded politicians who want to take freedom of expression away from the artist. Those who set themselves up as moral judges do not possess the truth. How dare they censor the expressions in art which may contain pieces of that truth we all seek.

Each artist is only one voice, but a totality of those voices creates understanding in our lives. Art contains a vision and truer understanding of our human experience. We can't afford to burn or destroy even the smallest detail reflected in the arts.

In a multicultural society, the rights of all the voices need to be respected. Our own cultural groups have something to teach us about the bigger world. You cannot burn the books of one group and expect democracy to work.

The same is true of art such as the vandalized mural at St. John's College. Vigil's mural was commissioned in 1987 by the president of the college. The title of the fresco is "Santa Madre Tierra/Gente Mesclada." It depicts the tricultural heritage of Santa Fe.

The images of the mural are indigenous to the Americas; they are rendered in a personal way by the artist.

A vandal took a hammer and destroyed the images of the mural. Those images belonged as much to the college as to me and to our community. An act of violence has been committed again.

Images and symbols are powerful, they can liberate people. The person who took a hammer and smashed the painting was

driven to destroy those images and symbols. They are a vision of truth which the vandals did not understand, and instead of learning from art, the vandal proceeded to destroy it. Like the burning of "Bless Me Ultima," this occurred in a school setting, a university where understanding and learning are the goals—not fear and destruction.

It did not help matters when the newly appointed president at St. John's College said he found the mural "childish and offensive." The images in the mural are indigenous symbols common to our heritage as a "Gente Mesclada." Instead of understanding our heritage and its rich symbols, the new president found it "offensive." Shortly thereafter the vandal took up his hammer.

Art should encourage discussion. What is it the vandal had to fear from Vigil's mural? Why did they burn my novel in 1981?

In a multicultural setting, artists from each group must be free to interpret the world from their own perspective. The other groups have the responsibility to respect those visions.

We don't have to like the product, but neither do we have a right to destroy or censor. Once we get to censoring and book burning, there is no end in sight. Those in charge will demand more and more power.

It's time that all of us opposed these acts of censorship, whether they happen in New Mexico or in the halls of Congress. Anywhere it occurs, we must stand against censorship. We must especially defend communities without political or economic power as they struggle to create their art and keep alive their cultural ways.

(Ed. Note: Rudolfo Anaya is a professor of English at the University of New Mexico. He has gained world-wide recognition for his novels, such as "Bless Me Ultima," "Tortuga," and "Heart of Aztlán." He is the Editor of BLUE MESA REVIEW, a literary magazine launched in spring of 1989 and designed to serve the writers of our region. The preceding article was first published in the *Albuquerque Journal* on April 1, 1990.)

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