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Rudolfo A. Anaya: Focus on Criticism Edited by César A. González-T. Lalo Press, \$19.95, Paper. ISBN 1234

Outside of special issues of small literary journals, there has never been a book-length collection of criticism on the work of a Chicano writer. This exhaustive study of Rudolfo A. Anaya's seminal output is, merely by default, a historic document. However, its deep seriousness and philosophical intent make it even more valuable.

Rudolfo A. Anaya had the immense bad taste to have been born Mexican-American. He further compounded this by identifying himself as "Chicano," and by choosing to remain in his beloved New Mexico. Like many "Southwestern" authors--his nemesis, Ed Abbey, comes to mind--Anaya has trouble being accepted by the East Coast taste-makers. I suspect he is seen as a regionalist, or a barrio-boy. Ironically, the grad-school revolutionaries who currently man the Chicano battlements chide Anaya for seeming to avoid the Marxist-Leninist line. His work, I may be looked on as "too political" by some readers, and "not political enough" by the rest. However, Anaya, who sees a kind of Native American spirituality in every detail of our lives, insists that all writing, if it is honestly written, is political in the extreme. How can one write about people and not be political? Conversely, how can one write about one person honestly, and not be writing about us all?

Briefly: Anaya wrote one of the classic Chicano/Hispano novels, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). This novel, perhaps the best-selling Chicano book of all, recalls Willa Cather, M. Scott Momaday or the Latin American novel, *Don Segundo Sombra*. A luminous (some say too luminous) tale of boyhood and magic, innocence and female mystery, *Ultima* won the Premio Quinto Sol upon its release. It has gone on to be worshipped, reviled, studied, attacked, emulated, scripted, developed, negotiated, translated, and argued about for well over a decade. The novelist's interest in myth is brightly evident in this first novel. In fact, myth, and our deterioration as spiritual beings due to our modern world's divorce from myth and magic, infuse nearly every bit of Anaya's writings. An interesting feature of the new critical collection is its return, in most of the essays, to this topic.

Having found such large success in the admittedly hermetic Chicano literary scene may have marked Anaya's career ever after. His subsequent novel, *Heart of Aztlan* (1976), began a storm of political controversy that has yet to abate. It made some readers uneasy with its mix of hard-times realism and its mythological dream-quest. The González book is rife with arguments about the imagined failures of the novel: was Rudy revolutionary enough? How dare a Chicano author suggest spiritual answers to clearly political oppressions?

The third and final segment of his New Mexico Trilogy, *Tortuga* (1979), suffered from backlash from the *Heart of Aztlan* brouhaha. This is unfortunate; *Tortuga* is a painful and mystical book about human suffering and loneliness told in a strangely affecting modernist voice (more on this later). If a Latin-American had written it, *Tortuga* would have been greeted with open arms. The setting--a ward for injured and seriously ill children--is an ever-darker minor inferno, where a boy in a body-cast whose nickname is "Tortuga" (Spanish for "turtle"...the clinic is at the foot of Tortuga Mountain as well) goes from ward to ward,

confronting horrors of the body, bedevilmments of the spirit and, ultimately, immense emotional transformation.

Tortuga is narrated in a voice more sparse than that of *Ultima*. In fact, the Trilogy reveals itself in its narration to flow from nineteenth century Romanticism to urban realist '30's-'50's writing to strange mystical minimalism. The evolution of the voice of these three books alone carries us through the history of New Mexico. Furthermore, the prescient use of a drier narration in the mid-'70's (later brought to fruition by the Anglo writers who currently hog the magazines and book shelves) creates a kind of subliminal hunger for Spirit. One of the critics in the González book chides Anaya for his failures of narrative when they can just as easily--and rightly--be seen as features of the book. The voice is the story in this novel; Anaya's half-mad challenge in the Trilogy is to the spiritually anorectic modern reader to shrug off science and political hard-ball and consider what we have lost--call it myth, Spirit, God, dream, vision, or even kachinas.

Although there are many works in his bibliography (one chapter of the González book is an exhaustive "Selected Bibliography of Works by and About Rudolfo A. Anaya" compiled with comments by Teresa Márquez--"Works By" alone consists of over 70 pieces), these three books, for better or worse, make up the bulk of Anaya scholarship.

González, in *Rudolfo A. Anaya: A Focus on Criticism*, claims for Anaya an equal footing with other writers of note. He is a sly editor. "Anaya scholarship" reveals itself to be anything but parochial. Critics from Europe argue lucidly as often as do Chicanos in this book: Heiner Bus, of the Gutenberg University, and Jean Cazemajou, from the University of Bordeaux bring the European critical sophistication to bear on Anaya. Certainly, González has not created the hagiography-session that one might suspect; many of the critics skewer the author and his works. González is smart enough to know from the outset that if Chicanos are to take their place in the world's literary ranks, they must face the same demands as other writers. No excuses and no pity involved. However, it is the hubris of this project to claim for Anaya--and for Chicano literature in general--this international attention. The upshot of it clearly being that serious critiques lead to a critical reputation, and ultimately, respect. Even the negatives further his case.

The silent challenge this book repeatedly offers is: if this literature, if our literature, is somehow less, let us find out here. But if it is not, then the world had better damn well pay us our due. In this sense, González has orchestrated a daring Chicano manifesto: the raza is throwing down.

It isn't beach reading: the uninitiated might be confounded by the analyses. The didactic and overly scholarly tone of a few of the essays is off-putting. However, the selection is broad and generous, and there are a pair of interviews, a round-table discussion and a glowingly written autobiography by Anaya that alone make the book worth buying. The Márquez bibliography is invaluable to the student and researcher, and several of the essays are stand-outs. Due to small size of Lalo Press, the book may be hard to find. It is worth tracking down. Seldom does a reader get the opportunity to read a book that is the first--and only--of its kind. Although some may find it depressing that such a great talent has

struggled for so long in arguable obscurity, those who love good writing will rejoice that America has another voice, telling another story that is alien yet our own, singular and universal. How can we possibly be harmed by opening the doors to new voices?

Perhaps the kachinas will smile on Anaya and González this time. Perhaps they will smile on us all.

(Lalo Press: P.O. Box 12086, La Jolla, CA, 92037.)

BOOKS BY RUDOLFO A. ANAYA

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