

Arts-Entertainment

Diversification Follows Intense Writing Decade

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Contrary to what one might believe, novelists rarely scrimp with short stories before tackling the tome.

Rudolfo Anaya, the reserved Albuquerquean sometimes called the "dean of Chicano writers," explained why: It's harder to write short than long.

"There's not a major novelist that I can think of in New Mexico who has published a short story collection," he said one afternoon last week. "They may have a few in a closet somewhere, but it's a demanding medium.

"You have a limited space to work with and you can't tie things up with new chapters like you can in a novel," he said, commenting that he made a similar discovery about scripts when working on a screenplay that's about ready to be sent to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The diminutive, dark and strikingly handsome novelist leaned back into an easy chair in the living room of his modest home on the West

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Mesa. His relaxation seemed deep as he propped up his feet and fastened honey brown eyes on the autumn-hued citywide view through his picture window.

He had invited a discussion centered around the recent publication of his first anthology of short stories, "The Silence of the Llano." It is among numerous diversified projects undertaken after an intense decade of work on the trilogy of novels for which he is best known. A local celebrity, he made a number of speaking appearances last year in connection with "Cuentos," a collection of Spanish folktales he co-edited and translated. But his reputation so far rests on his first book, "Bless Me, Ultima" (1972), already a local classic frequently recommended to those who want to know what it feels like to have grown up in New Mexico.

The three years since completing "Tortuga," the last of his trio, have been a time of creative experimentation for Anaya, who is currently on sabbatical from his teaching post at the University of New Mexico. In addition to the short stories, he has been working on two novels and a script called "Rosa Linda" chosen in a development competition sponsored by the Corporation of Public Broadcasting. He has also been writing essays on the thought processes behind the stories and of his second novel, "Heart of Aztlan."

Among all of these, the short pieces have most felt like exercises on how to completely draw a reader into a written environment. "Because they're shorter, they lend themselves to what I call the mood or aura that a story develops and you can do it better than you can with a longer work," he said. "With a short story, you can capture in one reading that mood."

When told that many of the short stories successfully transport the reader into a timeless world, this usually placid and unhurried man responded with a grateful rush of words.

"That's good. That's interesting that you should say that... Mood and time in most of the short stories were very important to me. (I kept asking myself) how do you fuse mood and time into the story? And I

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think that's part of the process of storytelling. If you sit around and listen to the good storyteller, you will become lost in how it turned out. The story itself has a time and the storyteller has a responsibility to get you into that time. For a while you're relaxed into it."

It seems natural that a man whose novels are like 20th century Hispanic folktales should have a fascination with the traditional oral tale-teller. A quiet, intense and driven individual, he likes to write down the results of what he terms his "story thinking."

"I am continually thinking stories," he said. "I think that's just the way my mind works. I have an idea for a story and characters come into me all day long. Ninety-nine percent of the stories I think about I never write. But the process, I think, is interesting.

"Who knows where they come from? I sense that there's something in the sensibility of the artist that's tuned into the vibrations of the mind and so every incident or experience or person or mood or idea is one of these vibrations that are constantly pounding into the subconscious. Some of them will strike with such force — those are the ones you really have to write.

As an example, he used the title story in "The Silence of the Llano." It's about a father and daughter who live trance-like lives, never speaking to each other while they go about the chores on their isolated homestead. For many years Anaya had in his mind the vision of a girl's face peering at him through a window. "And in the process of story thinking, maybe once a year that image would come. But one day it came with such force that I had to write that story."

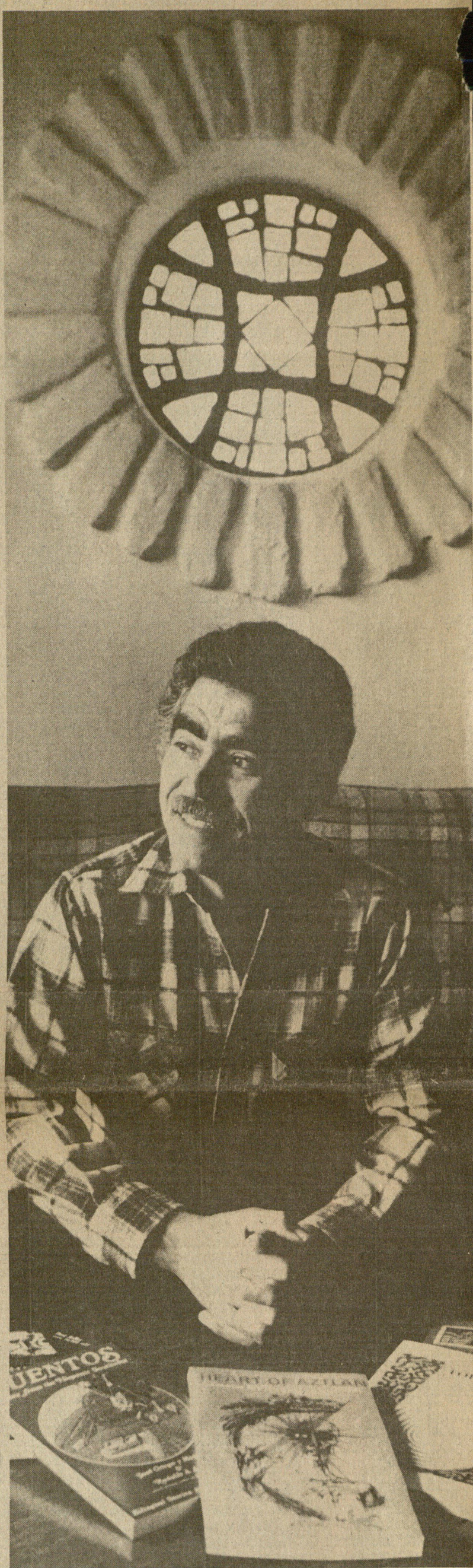
He believes his thought patterns predestined him to be a writer. "When I was growing up, my images, my dreams and my voices were in the room with me," he said. "Perhaps that's what makes one person a writer and another not. But maybe everybody has them and I just wasn't afraid of them. Maybe a lot of people have these images and voices and just shut them out.

"It is possible sometimes that our society stifles creativity. 'Don't be crazy. That's crazy. No nonsense.' And the writer needs nonsense."

However, there is little whimsy about Anaya's manner. And he considers himself a writer of serious fiction. "That is writing about the themes and people, problems that interest me as a writer and to explore those as deeply as I possibly can.

"Say someone asked me to write a baseball story/murder mystery with a lot of sex in it. I would be allowing an audience that reads that type of literature to dictate to me. But my intent has been more serious — oriented towards my own personal perspective rather than the audience.

"I'm not saying a writer can't do both. I think that in the short novel that I wrote this summer (speculating on the origin of the legend of La Llorona, the weeping woman heard in the wind) I had more of an audience in mind.



Author Rudolfo Anaya With Some of His Books

"And that's not saying one is right and one is wrong. But always be very careful to know when you're doing it."

Anaya's emphasis has been on the Hispanic experience because it's his own. "It's who I am. It's natural. Hemingway was an adventurer and war correspondent and big game hunter and he wrote that kind of literature. It's natural since the Chicano writers have experienced a kind of movement to look at their own communities and say, 'Hey, this is what I'm all about.'"

Born in Pastura, N.M., Anaya attended public schools in Santa Rosa and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of New Mexico.

His "Bless Me, Ultima" — about a young boy growing up in a tiny New Mexico village under the influence of an old woman healer feared by some as a witch — was finished just as publishing houses catering to Hispanic writers were becoming established and began giving a voice to that segment of society. "Among those of us involved in the movement, I guess my work is the most popular," he said.

But he shrugged off the title of "dean of the Chicano writers," most recently applied to him in a review of "Llano" in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner.

He was more interested in talking about how the intensity of milieu achieved in his short stories will be applied to the novel he's now writing. "It will probably have scenes or chapters that will seem very much like short stories," he said.

Showing off the office where he writes for several hours each morning, he leaned against the large window that has the same panoramic view as all the rooms on the east side of his house. He pointed to the television script with typed strips of rewritten dialogue neatly pasted on the pages, and talked about possibly getting a word processor to make his four to seven rewrites less tedious. But nothing can lessen the intellectual labor.

"You know, writing is a funny profession," he said. "I know I've written three novels and essays and screenplays, but every time I write a new story there is a little of that fear of flying. It's almost like... coming to it for the first time. It's interesting, I think, the creative tension that doesn't allow things to become boring. If I thought that I was so practiced in my art that everything I do would come out beautifully, I wouldn't worry. But I'm always pushing the limitations of style... how can I best communicate this thing?"