

## BOOK NEWS

EDITOR: GAYLE FELDMAN

# The Mainstream Discovers Rudolfo Anaya

Warner signs a founding father of Chicano literature to six-book deal

BY WILLIAM CLARK

What may be most striking about the six-title, six-figure book deal that New Mexico author Rudolfo Anaya recently concluded with Warner Books is that this major recognition has been so slow in coming.

Long hailed as one of the founding fathers of Chicano literature, described in the *New York Times Book Review* as "the novelist most widely known and read in the Latino community," in *Newsweek* as "the most widely read Mexican-American" period, Anaya is, as *Newsweek* also points out, "celebrated in the West and barely known back East." But all that is about to change, beginning in April, when Warner will simultaneously publish mass market paperback and color-illustrated hardcover editions of *Bless Me, Ultima*, Anaya's classic Chicano coming-of-age novel. This is the first hardcover appearance ever of the highly acclaimed 1972 work.

Though the players in this deal decline to give precise figures, Susan Bergholz, Anaya's New York agent, characterizes it as "a significant six-figure arrangement." A series of three contracts were settled between November 1992 and late 1993, calling for the appearance of five more books in the next three years.

In September, Warner will release a mass market paperback of Anaya's 1992 novel *Albuquerque* and a Spanish edition of *Bless Me, Ultima*—this publisher's first Spanish-language book, in a translation purchased from the Mexican house of Grijalbo. *The Anaya Reader*, composed of short fiction, essays and possibly a play or two, is scheduled for trade paperback publication in April 1995. Two new murder-mysteries will follow in hardcov-



er—*Zia Summer* in June '95 and *Rio Grande Fall* in summer '96. And, as icing on that rich literary cake, last year Anaya also sold Hyperion a pair of children's books.

The quantity and diversity of this material, its mix of old and new, is partly what makes Anaya's Warner deal so unusual, notes Bergholz. "For a publisher to say, 'We want to take you on as an author, with all your different masks,' used to happen a lot years ago, but doesn't often happen now. It was a gutsy thing to do."

To Anaya, Warner's commitment is emblematic of a dramatic shift in attitudes since the early '70s, when only academic publishers would accept Chicano writers. "We had nowhere else to go... it was *extremely* hard. But each community has art to offer, and now we've come to a place in American history where we celebrate that," says Anaya, who, at 56, has lived his entire literary life in Albuquerque.

For 19 years, until his retirement in 1993, he taught creative writing and Chicano literature at the University of New Mexico, whose press issued several of his later works. Since the appearance over two decades ago of *Bless Me, Ultima*—which, published by a small California press called Quinto Sol, has sold more than 300,000 copies in 21 printings—An-

aya has continued to produce at a prolific rate.

"This author has a huge following, was poised to launch into the mainstream," says Warner editor Colleen Kapklein, who initiated negotiations. "We saw him as having a strong track record, and he was taking a new direction in his work—telling more commercial stories, wanting to reach a wider audience—a direction we'd want him to take. There was a lot of good timing in this deal."

That timing also has to do, she says, with changes in the publishing industry linked to the debate about multiculturalism. "The industry has become much more open regarding what it can sell; you reach more readers if you publish more kinds of books, and readers are more open to different kinds of books." With nice poetic

justice, the success of several younger Latino writers, such as Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros, for whom Anaya provided inspiration and a role model, has helped create the climate for their mentor's breakthrough.

But there's further serendipity. Bergholz and Anaya connected in May 1992, and the agent soon floated their proposal for a package of books to a dozen publishers, all of whom expressed interest in parts of the package, but not in the whole vision. Meanwhile, Kapklein, who hadn't yet been contacted, saw the *Publishers Weekly* review of Anaya's novel *Albuquerque* and called Bergholz to discuss paperback rights. When she learned that *Bless Me, Ultima* was also available, along with two new novels, she swung into action and within three months a contract was in place for the initial phase of the deal.

Anaya is a quiet, reserved man, but this new arrangement, with its promise of national distribution, coming as it does just when he's finally able to devote all his time to writing, clearly gives him deep satisfaction. "What a writer wants is to communicate with people," he says simply. "The other part of it—me going on writing, doing the things that interest me, following inclinations about where the work is leading me—will remain the same. But it's a whole new ball game."

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