

Read It, Kids! Your Parents Don't Have to Know!

California School District Removes *Bless Me, Ultima* from Curriculum

by Steven Robert Allen



On May 10, the Laton Joint Unified School District in Central California opted to remove Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) from its 9th grade English curriculum. Superintendent Clifford Tyler said parents had complained that the novel contained vulgar words in Spanish and glorified witchcraft and death.

Here in New Mexico, all this seems pretty ridiculous. *Bless Me, Ultima* is an acknowledged classic of Chicano literature and a celebrated piece of New Mexico's literary heritage. The novel tells the story of Antonio, a young boy living in a small village in northern

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New Mexico at the end of World War II. An old woman named Ultima comes to live with Antonio's family, and an intimate relationship develops between elder and boy.

Anyone who's actually read the book will recognize that the school district's charges are ludicrous. I'm not even going to bother to name the enormous numbers of acknowledged classics in which characters use strong language. As far as glorifying witchcraft goes, Ultima is not a witch. She's a *curandera*, a healer, who uses her magic powers to protect people from witchcraft. And glorification of death? Ultima's dying words instruct Antonio to always have the strength to live and love life. Yes, the book explores

Antonio's evolving spirituality and his conflicted feelings regarding the Catholic church and the folk religion practiced by Ultima. But if the school district wants to ensure that their students don't read books that glorify witchcraft, they should throw Shakespeare's *The Tempest* into their bonfires. And if they want their students to avoid reading books that are death-obsessed, *Hamlet* should be the first to follow.

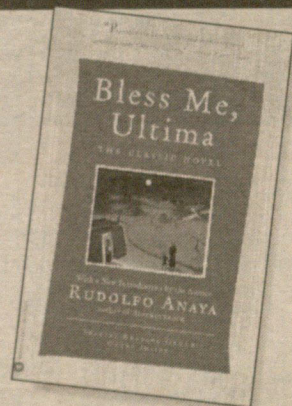
If *Bless Me, Ultima* glorifies anything, it glorifies kindness, righteousness, life, family, tradition, freewill and spirituality, things that don't ordinarily move parents to set big piles of books on fire in the middle of town square. There must be something else going on here.

The author is as puzzled as anyone. "It came out of the clear blue sky," Anaya says. He feels that the various deaths which occur in the book are central to the story. As far as witchcraft goes, as Anaya points out, Ultima is a healer, not a witch, and if the book glorifies anything, it glorifies traditional folk religion—not satanism, for God's sake. "Witchcraft is a really loaded term," he says. "I'm certainly not glorifying it. Just the opposite. I'm trying to explain it."

So what's the deal?

"I think it's symptomatic of a backlash against any literature or art that has to do with our [Chicano] community," Anaya says. "Some people don't want to adapt these things into our curriculums. It's a legacy of the former governor of California." Former Governor Pete Wilson severely restricted the degree to which immigrants have access to education, healthcare and other social services. "He left a negative feeling toward Mexicans in the state. If you stop to think about it, there's a pattern there, and it's very insidious."

Anaya is annoyed that the par-



ents took quotes from *Bless Me, Ultima* out of context without actually reading the book. "I think the community has to deal with it," he says. "They have to first read the novel, then discuss it as a work of literature and figure out how it can be taught. It's symptomatic of the times. There's an element out there that is very fearful of our culture. We have to be vigilant."

Thankfully, all the uproar about the school district's decision has focused new attention on Anaya's novel. "The positive thing for me is that I'm getting student letters from all over the country from people who have read the book and loved it and discussed the themes with good teachers. It's gratifying that there are lots of students reading it. So we have to keep things in perspective."

Hopefully, all the attention this book is getting will lead more people—including an army of defiant youngsters—to seek it out, read it and decide for themselves, without the input of their illiterate, bigoted parents, whether or not it's worth experiencing. If that's the ultimate effect of this whole debacle, then we should all chip in and buy the Laton Joint Unified School District a big bouquet of long-stemmed roses and a box of expensive Belgian chocolates. Keep up the good work, folks. We're all real proud of you. 🌱

Bless Me - Banned