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FEATURES EDITOR PAULA



Photo illustration courtesy of Cinco Puntos Press

**El Paso artist** Gaspar Enriquez illustrated the cover for Rudolfo Anaya's next book, "An Elegy on the Death of César Chávez," scheduled for release in October by El Paso's Cinco Puntos Press.

# Dean of Chicano literature

# salutes César Chávez

By Ramon Renteria

El Paso Times

**O**ne night, Rafaelita Anaya put her son on a sheepskin rug and surrounded him with various objects that — according to the lore of the New Mexico llano — could predict the toddler's future.

The young Rudolfo Anaya ignored a lariat and a hammer, but reached out instead for a pencil and paper.

Writing, it would seem, was Rudolfo's destiny.

Now, at age 62, the man often described as the world's most widely read Chicano author is still cranking out stories.

Although he quit teaching at the University of New Mexico seven years ago, Anaya is not the type to kick back and do nothing but sip margaritas out on the patio.

"Retirement is when St. Peter opens the gate," Anaya said in a telephone interview from his home in Albuquerque. "Every day is a new journey. I have to work every day just like a plumber, an electrician or the guy that drives the bus."

Best known as the author of "Bless Me, Ultima" — the 1972 novel that became a Chicano literature classic and is studied in high schools and colleges across the United States — Anaya still is pushing causes, nurturing young writers and writing every day, translating *cuENTOS* and writing novels, short stories, poems or plays.

In October, El Paso's Cinco Puntos Press is publishing Anaya's latest book, "An Elegy on the Death of César Chávez," a tribute to the farm labor leader who died in 1993. El Paso's Gaspar Enriquez illustrated the book.

Anaya will be a featured author at the Border Book Festival in Las Cruces March 19-



Photo courtesy of Lee Byrd

**Chicano writer Rudolfo Anaya** and his wife, Patricia, relaxed with their dog during a 1999 outing in Taos, N.M.

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Anaya's thoughts on Chávez's death floated around for years but never had been published.

"When César died, we all felt the loss, and there was no one there to take his place,"

## Books by Rudolfo Anaya

### New Mexico Trilogy

- ▶ 1972: "Bless Me, Ultima."
- ▶ 1979: "Tortuga."
- ▶ 1981: "Heart of Aztlán."

### Other works

- ▶ 1982: "The Silence of the Llano."
- ▶ 1984: "The Legend of La Llorona."
- ▶ 1986: "A Chicano in China."
- ▶ 1987: "Lord of the Dawn."
- ▶ 1992: "Albuquerque."
- ▶ 1995: "The Farolitos of Christmas."
- ▶ 1996: "Jalmaná."
- ▶ 1996: "Maya's Children."

### Sonny Baca mysteries

- ▶ 1995: "Zia Summer."
- ▶ 1996: "Rio Grande Fall."

Anaya said.

Cinco Puntos publisher Bobby Byrd encouraged Anaya to put the Chávez project in book form.

"Most people don't realize that Rudy is not only a writer. He's a real activist in the literary community," Byrd said. "He doesn't have to, but he's taken his position as a role model seriously."

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## Dean

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So seriously that Anaya helps Chicano writers and writers from the Southwest become known nationally. Anaya brings Chicano writers to New Mexico in the summer and gives them a place to write, lends them his cabin retreat in the mountains of northern New Mexico.

"He's a true *patrón*," Byrd said. "A friend of mine crosses himself every time somebody mentions Rudy's name."

Byrd is referring to the fact that some writers and followers of Chicano doctrine often label Anaya the *padrino*, the godfather, of Chicano literature, part of the civil-rights movement that helped a generation of Mexican-Americans define their identity.

Anaya welcomes accolades but does not let fame interfere with his humility. Not many writers of his stature list their home numbers in the telephone directory.

"I accept those titles as tokens of respect. In our culture, we have a tradition of respect for the elders," Anaya said. "Then I remind people that I wasn't the only one writing in the early days of the Chicano movement."

### Anaya's legacy

Denise Chávez emerged out of the Mesilla Valley and became a prominent Chicana writer.

Chávez points to Anaya as the strongest influence in her success, serving as mentor and helping her land a fellowship that led to a master's degree at the University of New Mexico.

"He's the first person who believed in me," Chávez said. "He was my first editor. I had never been edited by anyone as meticulously, never known anybody who values work like him."

Chávez became a close family friend, close enough that she can boast that she once slept in the guest room where Anaya plastered silver stars and images of the planets for his granddaughter.

"In so many ways, he's been a friend, a mentor, a *compadre* and a brother," Chávez said.

Linda Rivera, the librarian at El Paso High School, puts together a reading list for college-bound students that includes "Bless Me, Ultima" with mainstream authors like Saul Bellow, D.H. Lawrence, Susan Power, J.D. Salinger and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

"It's an American classic," Rivera said of "Ultima." "Our kids don't find the mysteries of

## Anaya on other topics

► **Daily philosophy:** "Enjoy life and be as involved in it as you can."

► **Helping others:** "I try to make my life exciting every day. And then I look at the young writers and say: Let's create a little excitement in their life, nurture their creativity."

► **Reviving roots:** "We have a tremendous dropout rate in our schools. Our Mejicanitos, Chicano kids are dropping out of their future. It is incumbent on

us to go back and remind them of their history, their literature and help them along."

► **Hispanics in film and television:** "We have the talent, but it's going to be more difficult to crack than the publishing world. The problem is that it takes too much money and we haven't had people eager to invest in our story yet."

"Rudolfo can write well in all the genres that he attempts, whether it's children's books, history or a mainstream novel," Gonzales said. "My art is very compatible with his writing."

Gonzales describes Anaya as one of the most accessible writers he has ever encountered, sharing his time with anybody, a struggling writer, an artist or just an individual pushing a worthy cause.

"This is the sign of a man not straddled with problems of ego," Gonzales said.

Anaya might play down his contributions, but others such as Chicano novelist Benjamin Saenz, who grew up in Southern New Mexico, credit him with helping nurture Chicano writers.

"He wrote the first and most successful Chicano work of fiction. Simply put, 'Bless Me Ultima' remains one of the seminal texts in the study of Chicano literature," Saenz said.

Anaya and his wife, Patricia, established the Premio Aztlán in 1993, a national literary prize for Chicano literature.

The latest recipient, short story writer Sergio Troncoso, formerly of El Paso, will receive the award in Albuquerque later this month.

"Rudolfo Anaya was always one of my literary heroes when I was growing up," Troncoso said. "In simple and pointed language, he has told many of the great stories of Chicanos from the Southwest."

Like other Chicanos, Troncoso easily identified with "Bless Me, Ultima's" central characters: Antonio, the young boy, and Ultima, the elderly, mystical figure who is part of the Márez family.

Anaya explains that nudging other writers is an important priority for a writer who has been on the literary landscape for so long. Very few national literary prizes cater specifically to Chicano writers. Only a handful of Chicano or Chicana writers ever make it into programs that help writers teach or fine tune their

"We've been separated from our oral traditions. We have to give back to young people that history, whether it be in poems, stories, plays or music, and create a sense of belonging," Anaya said.

Anaya sees an optimistic outlook for the next generation of Chicano writers, no longer the handful of writers who struggled for recognition in the 1970s.

"We haven't even begun to scratch the surface. Our people are getting into all sorts of different areas of literature," Anaya said.

Abelardo Baeza, a professor of

Chicano studies at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, recently finished writing a biography on his literary hero, "Man of Aztlán."

In the beginning, Baeza had trouble finding any kind of anthology of reputable Chicano literature. Now, he says, "Bless Me, Ultima" is the most widely read Chicano novel in the world.

"The man is pure heart, one of the most gentle, considerate human beings I have ever met, passionate about his work," Baeza said. "He has given a number of us an opportunity to follow in his footsteps."

Dennis Bixler-Marquez, director of Chicano studies at the University of Texas at El Paso, says Anaya, admired for giving the outside world a profound glimpse of growing up Hispanic in the Southwest, is most effective at connecting with the readers through his readings and lectures.

These days, Anaya no longer has to reach outside the sheepskin rug to foretell what to do next.

Admirers of Anaya's work and spirit know that he will keep churning out New Mexico-style literary gems.

"He's going to be writing to his last day," Denise Chávez said. "Que viva!"

the Southwestern culture in very many books."

Once readers discover him, few ever forget Anaya.

"He's the quintessential Southwesterner, quietly self-confident," Rivera said. "He speaks beautifully to children about not losing the sense of who they are."

Edward Gonzales, a New Mexico artist living in Bernalillo north of Albuquerque, illustrated two Anaya children's books, "The Farolitos of Christmas" and "Farolitos for Abuelo."

Gonzales admires Anaya's versatile, straightforward, classic style and devotion to writing about New Mexico and the Chicano experience.

craft.

"We have so little support on the national scene so we have to nurture those writers in our own community," Anaya said. "We have a long way to go. Let's help each other."

### Viva Anaya!

Since he stopped teaching, Anaya has written three murder-mystery novels, five children's stories and countless poems. He has traveled in the United States and Spain.

Anaya is compiling another book of cuentos, translating them into English so that young people today can understand their culture and history.