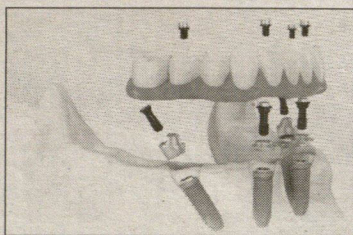


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IN OTHER WORDS

book reviews

The Old Man's Love Story by Rudolfo Anaya, University of Oklahoma Press, 170 pages

While we don't know what happens on the other side, we do know that death is hard on the living. It leaves a hole on this side, leaves the living to justify their survival, leaves them to choose whether to overcome or to succumb. So death is frequently addressed in the arts — our attempt



to breathe understanding into a vacuum of grief. In *The Old Man's Love Story*, Rudolfo Anaya turns to his talents to work through the pain of loss, lyrically churning devastation and depression into a deeper appreciation of life's continual gifts.

In the first chapter, Anaya borrows from an 1877 poem by English Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins. In "God's Grandeur," Hopkins writes that the world "will flame out, like shining from shook foil." Anaya uses the same phrase, framing grandeur as "the pulse of life"

that comes, then passes away, touched by "an eternal, universal spirit, God, the Great Mystery. Life ends, like shining from shook foil."

The light of Anaya's life, his wife Patricia, died in 2010 under hospice care. His foil was dull and wrinkled, balled up in the corner. He lay down next to it and waited. Anaya's unnamed "old man" comes from his own heart, and the book reads like a sonnet to his beloved. The work, he says in the preface, is his way of thanking family and friends who sustained him through darkness to renewed purpose.

"She had not gone away," he writes. "Maybe the flesh he had loved so well now lay silent in the urn, ashes, a reminder, something symbolic, but not her. Not her essence. The old man began to understand that those one loved dearly don't disappear. They're like breath — here, aware. A kind of resurrection he needed to understand."

A writer who has enlightened generations with ancient myth as a way of explaining life, Anaya — and his "old man" — now fights to explain this next step. The old man clings to love, "fired in a celestial forge," and envisions a marriage that continues in a mystical way — he in body, she in spirit. He is a man learned in the ways of the spirits, but he's never sure where she is or how this relates to his own position.

The short work is full of after-death conversations between the old man and the woman, whose picture he kisses several times a day. The man is still trying to call her fleeting spirit back to his side, "wrestling with the most profound conflict of his life." This results — in some instances — in passages that the reader must decode. Is the old man imagining every bit of this exchange? Is she really so near? Do his dreams cross into waking?

Like nearly every other work from Anaya, this one is grounded in his Northern New Mexico heritage, with visions of fish in the Pecos River, lowriders on Albuquerque's Central Avenue, and a mesmerizing retelling of how it feels when rain finally touches the ground in a summer monsoon. His 1972 *Bless Me, Ultima* had a movie premiere this year, but Anaya's literary recognition has much wider reach. Last year, his novels, plays, children's books, and other works earned him a lifetime achievement award from *The Los Angeles Times*. *The Old Man's Love Story*, which Anaya penned in his late 70s, has a swan song feel about it. But Anaya alone gets to say when his celebrated career is over.

— Julie Ann Grimm