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ARTS ■ F1



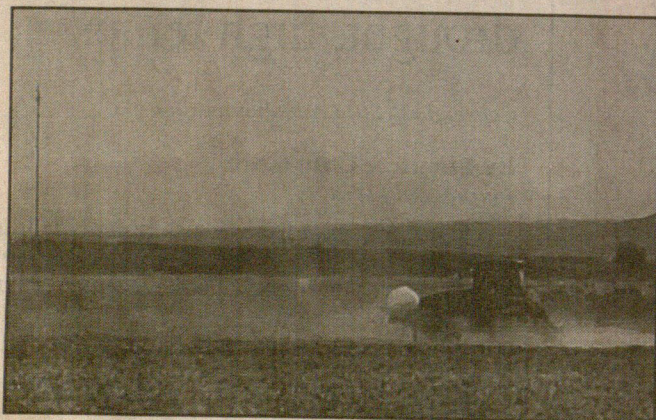
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- 4 NEW MEXICO TO GET NEW NATIONAL MONUMENT** SANTA FE — New Mexico is about to get a new national monument.
- 5 TIRES, BATTERY STOLEN FROM SUV AFTER FATAL CRASH** CARLSBAD — New Mexico police investigating a fatal traffic crash found that somebody stole wheels, tires and the battery from a wrecked SUV as it lay on top of the victim.



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# New Mexico novel still fuels fears

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"promote the overthrow of the United States government, promote resentment toward a race or class of people, are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group or advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals."

That prompted the state school superintendent to direct the Tucson schools to ax its Mexican American Studies program, and "Bless Me, Ultima" disappeared from the curriculum along with a long list of acclaimed novels and works of nonfiction. Some of the books were taken from classrooms, put in boxes and moved to storage.

"Bless Me, Ultima" was published 40 years ago, and today it manages to exist simultaneously as a cherished touchstone for millions of readers, a charming and well-reviewed movie and a seditious and race-baiting piece of literature.

It must be an odd moment in the life of its author.

Not that Anaya hasn't been here before.

After we poured the coffee, and dachshunds Oso and Chamisa settled down at our feet, Anaya told me a lesson he has learned in his 75 years on this earth.

"There's nothing new under the sun," he said.

"Bless Me, Ultima" is ranked No. 32 on the American Library Association's list of 100 most banned or challenged books of all time (it was No. 5 in 2008), and Anaya keeps a file of newspaper stories that recount efforts to ban the book or burn it.

They're from all over the country, and one, from 1981, recounts how members of the Bloomfield School Board in San Juan County personally oversaw the burning of copies of the book that had been used in a cultural awareness class.

"This has been going on since I first published," Anaya told me. "And it's not just me being banned."

Anaya was in on the ground floor of the Chicano literature movement, one of a group of young authors who told their own stories set in their own hometowns and neighborhoods with characters who looked and talked like them.

White Southern authors had done the



COURTESY

Miriam Colon, left, plays curandera Ultima in the film version of "Bless Me, Ultima," Rudolfo Anaya's novel. The book is among those removed from Tucson schools under a state law that scrapped Mexican-American studies.

same thing as they created the genre of Southern literature, just as African-American writers in New York created the cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Writers telling their stories from their point of view — it was really nothing new. But, as the library association's compilations reveal, there have always been people who react to fiction as though it were real.

"What is it about literature that makes people fearful?" Anaya asks.

It's a question for the ages. And, in a way, it's a success story for literature. If it provokes fear or anger, well, then it has communicated something and stirred an emotion.

I see "Bless Me, Ultima," the story of a New Mexico boy's relationship with the curandera who comes to live with his family, as a coming-of-age story; a story about the changing landscape of small-town Hispanic life after World War II; a meditation on Catholic faith and the tests to that faith; an exploration of folk medicine and the curandera's power; and a love story to New Mexico's landscape.

When the book has been banned or burned, the objections raised are usually to its use of curse words and the subject of witchcraft.

The boys and the men in the book do curse, often in Spanish, and supernatural properties are a central current of the story.

The jump from curse words and *brujas* to banning and burning seems like a long one. And many more people have found value in the book than have found things to criticize.

The book has sold millions of copies, was chosen by the National Endowment for the Arts as part of its "Big Read" program and was included by former first lady Laura Bush, a librarian, on her list of top 10 must-reads.

Because Anaya has been around a while and because he knows there is nothing new under the sun, he said he would not be surprised if the movie version of "Bless Me, Ultima" becomes more provocative when it comes out on DVD and is used in classrooms as a companion to the book.

Why? Because a movie shown in a theater or watched at home is judged by a different standard than a film that is part of a school curriculum.

"The battle is in the educational forum," he told me. When a piece about minorities becomes part of a curriculum, he said, it is interpreted as advocating for that minority, "an attempt to change the student, change the society. The concept of the other who is not like you has always been feared."

Anaya, meanwhile, knows from experience that book bannings and boxings and burnings come and go; that they tend to increase sales, not hurt them; and that, when you put your work out there, everyone has a right to criticize.

And to make a bonfire?

"Yes," Anaya says. "They have that right, too."

His new novel, "The Old Man's Love Story," is due out next month. While Anaya keeps track of censorship attempts and has been gratified to see one of his stories on the big screen, movies and book banning are not his focus.

"I stay at home and write," he said.

UpFront is a daily front-page news and opinion column. Comment directly to Leslie at 823-3914 or [llinicum@abqjournal.com](mailto:llinicum@abqjournal.com). Go to [www.abqjournal.com/letters/new](http://www.abqjournal.com/letters/new) to submit a letter to the editor.