

BOOKS

PAGE F4 | SUNDAY, APRIL 28, 2013 | THE SUNDAY JOURNAL

Jewish doctor recounts story of survival

■ *Connections, good luck help family survive the Nazi invasion of Poland*

"Country of Ash: A Jewish Doctor in Poland, 1939-1945" by Edward Reicher; Bellevue Literary Press (256 pages, \$16.95)

REVIEW BY MIKE FISCHER
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

At 5 a.m., physician Edward Reicher and his wife, Pola, both Jewish, awoke to the sound of German bombs falling on an airfield near their home in Poland. It was Sept. 1, 1939. The Reichers "watched the strange scene before us as if it were a film," because they "could not yet comprehend the full horror" of what they saw.

Can any of us — ever — truly reach comprehension when thinking about the Holocaust? It's a question Reicher repeatedly asks himself in "Country of Ash," the posthumously published memoir recounting how he, Pola and their little girl somehow survived.

Reicher's story moves quickly through an initial stay in the Lodz ghetto — in which 200,000 Jews were "parked" in an area barely fit for 30,000 — before taking us to the bigger one in Warsaw, filled with "emaciated faces already marked by death."

As the pace of deportations picks up, he and his family escape the ghetto and begin a nervy cat-and-mouse game, changing hideouts throughout Warsaw while trying to pass as Aryan. They stow their daughter in a convent. A bleached-blond Pola gets a job as a domestic. A disguised Reicher works in the rail yards.

Even after they're liberated and return to Lodz in 1945, the Reichers witness the virulent anti-Semitism that swept Poland following the war, making them feel like strangers in their own homeland — one bereft, now, of the many dead they had once known and loved.

The general trajectory of Reicher's narrative — and the horrors unfolding within it — may feel familiar. But no matter how many films one sees or memoirs one reads, it remains difficult to trace the descending circles in this inferno. Reicher's book is not long, but it took me a full week to work through it.

How could it be otherwise, as one accompanies this renowned and wealthy doctor, just days after the German invasion, to a makeshift holding pen — harbinger of so much to come? Or watches Pola miscarry, after being viciously kicked in the stomach by a German soldier? Or hears a baby cry — before it is suffocated, so that others in hiding aren't themselves discovered?

We listen to a boyhood chum tell Reicher to give over his childhood home, since "you and your father will soon be exterminated." We look on with a crowd of peasants, which includes an agonized Reicher, as Jewish friends he'd planned on meeting for dinner are executed. We see a young teen yank a gold crown from Reicher's tooth, claiming it's payback for Jewish extortion.

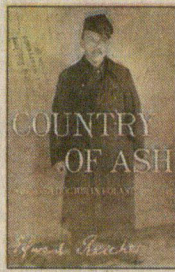
But we also watch the improbable cast of characters who help keep Reicher alive. A Polish countess. An aging prostitute. An anti-Semitic but also deeply religious Russian. A young farmer. A Viennese doctor. A German policeman, who falls hard for Pola's sister.

Reicher's money and his connections help his family survive, but so does luck. Julie Orringer — herself a descendant of Holocaust survivors and the author of an excellent novel featuring Hungarian Jews during World War II — once observed that those who made it "did so because of a series of fortunate coincidences," the "tiny things" that "might seem miraculous" today.

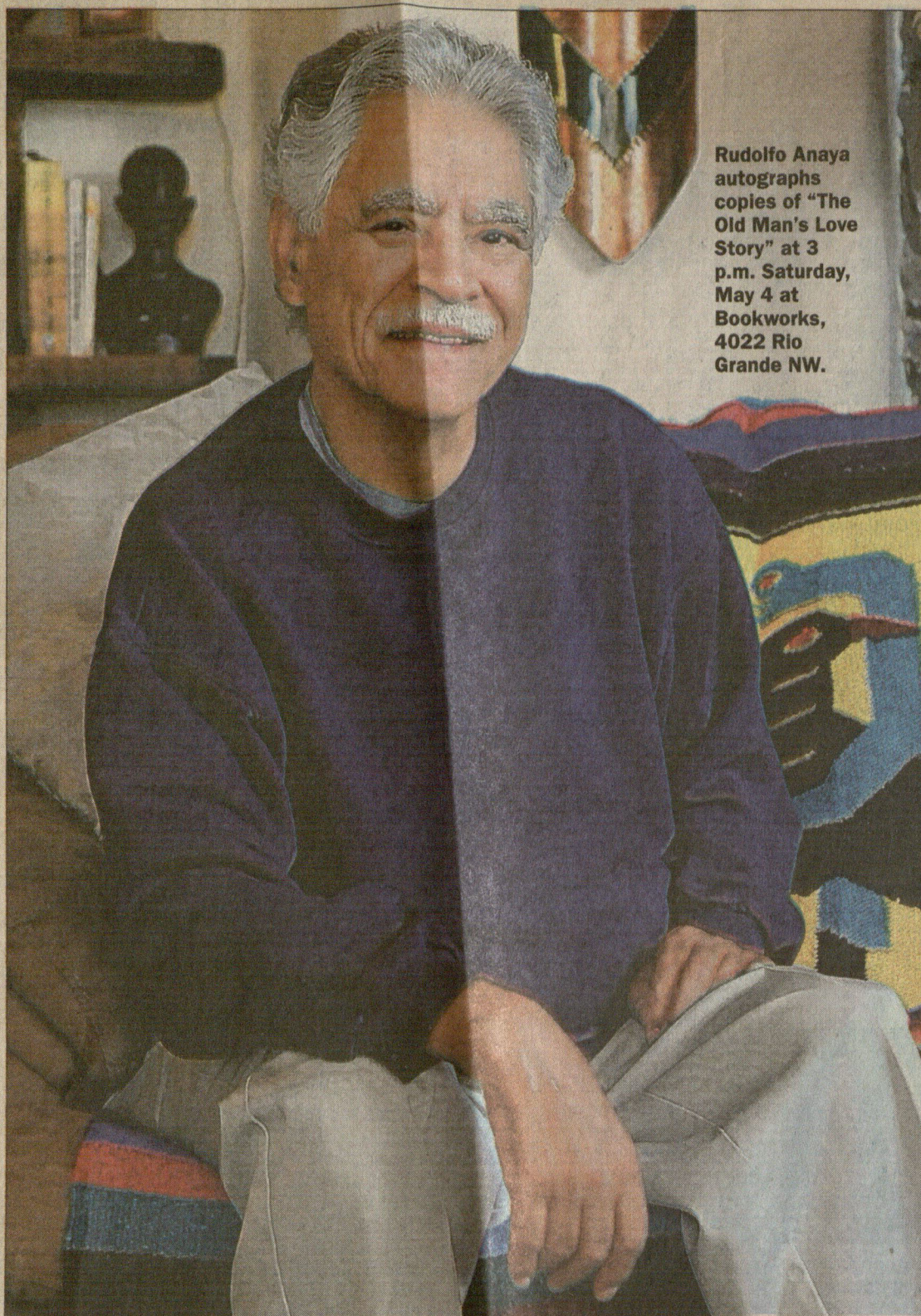
Unlike Orringer, Reicher himself is neither a novelist nor a stylist, and he doesn't pretend otherwise.

Reicher tells us in his introduction that he has "no literary pretensions," and despite occasional flights of eloquence, his fact-driven narrative is written in straightforward, unadorned prose. Much of the dialogue — appearing in English as the translation of a translation — is clumsy and stiff.

But it's the rough texture of Reicher's tale — like grainy celluloid from a bygone era — that gives such a powerful, deeply disturbing immediacy to the ghetto inhabitants he remembers. Reicher tells us they're no more, but he is wrong. Their ghosts still walk in books like this one — haunting the reader, forever.



BOOK OF THE WEEK REVIEW



Rudolfo Anaya autographs copies of "The Old Man's Love Story" at 3 p.m. Saturday, May 4 at Bookworks, 4022 Rio Grande NW.

True love story

Rudolfo Anaya's creative memoir tackles mortality, memory and the drive to live

"The Old Man's Love Story" by Rudolfo Anaya
University of Oklahoma Press, \$19.95, 170 pp.

REVIEW BY DAVID STEINBERG
For the Journal

I laughed. I cried. Literally. Rudolfo Anaya's part fictionalized memoir is tender and lyrical. Yet it is a powerful, thoughtful meditation on life and death.

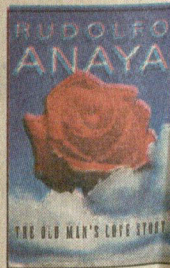
"The Old Man's Love Story" is an emotional ride that will provoke laughter and tears. For me, a few soft tears fell in the first few paragraphs when the old man's wife is dying.

This is what he says: "It's time to stop breathing," he whispered. "Tell your heart to stop. Your parents are waiting for you."

"Beyond the veil waited those who had gone before. Her mother and father, her grandparents, his parents, friends."

The laughter — I mean raucous laughter — came for me 24 pages later, at the end of the chapter "The Gym." Here is part of the episode.

A widower, the old man is constantly trying to deal with his grief. Should he confine himself to home and the garden? Should he find a diversion, a new love interest? Maybe later. For now he attends a water aerobics class. Among the fellow senior citizens in the class is Ernesto, who is always showing up in a skimpy,



tight-fitting bathing suit like those Olympic swimmers wear.

The sight of him triggers the old man's memories of his own youthful conquests and how much identity is linked to hormones for teens. But Ernesto's suit bugs him. He shouts that Ernesto is "a fake! A bully!"

The spirit voice of his late wife calms the old man. She replies that "anger only stresses you, not the person who causes the anger." (The spirit of his late wife reappears through the book as an adviser, a companion and a memory aid to him.)

The old man gets a call from a female aerobics classmate about a rosary for Ernesto. A rosary? It seems Ernesto was taking male enhancement drugs and steroids. His ticker quit. The chapter ends with this unanswered quip from the old man: "Would they bury Ernesto in his Speedo?"

"An Old Man's Love Story" weaves into the fabric of the memoir musings on the mountain of memories he has amassed with a beloved partner, on the recollections of trips to foreign countries, especially those to magical Mexico, on the stages of life, on mortality and, yes, on love.

I can envision the book being adapted for theater as a one-person piece.

Anaya, a longtime Albuquerque resident and the dean of Chicano literature, wrote this creative memoir after his wife, Pat, had died in January 2010. They had been married for almost 44 years. Writing it, Anaya said, helped him through the grieving process.

BEST-SELLERS

FICTION

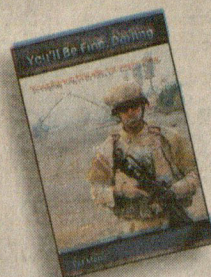
1. **"Whiskey Beach."** Nora Roberts. Putnam
2. **"Daddy's Gone a Hunting."** Mary Higgins Clark. Simon & Schuster
3. **"Taking Eve."** Iris Johansen. St. Martin's
4. **"Starting Now."** Debbie Macomber. Ballantine
5. **"Don't Go."** Lisa Scottoline. St. Martin's
6. **"Six Years."** Harlan Coben. Dutton
7. **"Unintended Consequences."** Stuart Woods. Putnam
8. **"Gone Girl."** Gillian Flynn. Crown
9. **"Life After Life."** Kate Atkinson. L.B./Reagan Arthur
10. **"The Burgess Boys."** Elizabeth Strout. Random House

NONFICTION

1. **"Lean In."** Sheryl Sandberg. Knopf
2. **"LeaderShift."** Woodward/DeMille. Grand Central/Business Plus
3. **"The One Thing."** Gary Keller. Bard Press
4. **"The Fast Metabolism Diet."** Haylie Pomroy. Harmony
5. **"It's All Good."** Gwyneth Paltrow. Grand Central
6. **"The Duck Commander Family."** Willie & Korie Robertson. Howard Books
7. **"The Athena Doctrine."** Gerzema/D'Antonio. Jossey-Bass
8. **"Life Code."** Dr. Phil McGraw. Bird Street Books
9. **"Man 2.0 Engineering the Alpha."** Romaniello/Bornstein. HarperOne
10. **"Relish."** Daphne Oz. William Morrow

EFFECTS OF WAR

Pat Mena of El Paso is the author of "You'll Be Fine, Darling: Struggling with PTSD after the Trauma of War." It is the story of her late son Anthony's struggle with the effects of war after returning from Iraq and her determination to help him cope. He had been stationed at Kirtland Air Force Base. The book is available at www.amazon.com.



NEW MEXICO BOOK NOTES

Self-help genre gets shot of humor

■ *Best-selling author Augusten Burroughs makes survival a laughing matter*

Augusten Burroughs, the New York Times No. 1 best-selling author of books such as "Running With Scissors," "Dry" and "Wolf at the Table," will make an appearance on behalf of his newest book, "This Is How: Surviving What You Think You Can't," at 7 p.m. Monday, April 29 in Room 125 in Dane Smith Hall at the University of New Mexico.

Publishers Weekly said in its starred review, "Hilarious and searingly straight forward ... Burroughs turns the self-help genre upside down."

The event is sponsored by Bookworks and the UNM Creative Writing Department.

AT BOOKWORKS: Three-time breast cancer survivor Pasha Hogan will be speaking about and signing her book, "Third Time Lucky: A Creative Recovery," at 7 p.m. Thursday, May 2. Hogan is the founder of Creative Recovery, a program designed to help young cancer survivors move beyond a debilitating diagnosis and treatment to grow in their lives.

Don Miguel Ruiz Jr. will sign his book "The Five Levels of Attachment: Toltec Wisdom for the Modern World" at noon Tuesday, April 30. And Rudolfo Anaya will sign his new book, "Old Man's Love Story," at 3 p.m. Saturday, May 4.

At 5 p.m. Thursday, May 2, Robin Preiss Glasser, illustrator of the nationally best-selling picture book series "FANCY NANCY" will be at Bookworks, 4022 Rio Grande NW.

IN SILVER CITY: "Young Voices of Silver City," the first anthology to be published featuring young writers of the city, will be unveiled from 2-4 p.m. today in the Western New Mexico University Global Resource Center, Kentucky and 12th Street. There will be a VIP reception that is free and open to the public. There will be light refreshments, a silent auction and book signings for "Young Voices of Silver City," "Voices of New Mexico Too" and "Voices of New Mexico." The event benefits Literacy Alive of Silver City.

AT BARNES AND NOBLE: Hillerman Prize winner Christine Barber will talk about and sign her book "When the Devil Doesn't Show" at 1 p.m. Saturday, May 4. Also on Saturday at 2:30 p.m. Josh Suchon, play-by-play announcer for the Isotopes, will give a book talk and sign "Miracle Men: Hershisher, Gibson and the Improbable 1988 Dodgers." The bookstore is in Coronado Shopping Center.

BOOK LAUNCH: Local author Ronn Perea will launch his book "The Email Tango" from noon-5 p.m. today at Treasure House Books & Gifts, 2012 South Plaza NW in Old Town. There will be food, fun and tango dances every hour on the hour.

Also at Treasure House, author C.S. Merrill signs the new trade paperback edition of her book "Weekends with O'Keeffe" from 1-3 p.m. Saturday, May 4. The events are free.

AT PAGE ONE: Five poets who have had their works published by Red Mountain Press will be at Page One Bookstore, 11018 Montgomery NE, at 2:30 p.m. today to read from and sign their poetry collections. On hand will be Elizabeth Raby, Gary Worth Moody, Robyn Hunt, Donald Levering and Susan Gardner.

Don Miguel Ruiz Jr. will talk about and sign his book "The Five Levels of Attachment: Toltec Wisdom for the Modern World" at 7 p.m. Monday, April 29. Ruiz is a Nagual or Toltec Master of Transformation.

Jenny Milchman, a suspense author from New Jersey, will be making a brief stop at Page One at 3 p.m. Thursday, May 2, to meet readers and sign copies of "Cover of Snow."

The bookstore also will hold a self-published and local author fair from 3-5 p.m. Saturday, May 4.

