

Rudolfo Anaya's fiction has been fueled by characters that come to life and by memories that will not die.



Man of VISIONS

Trail-blazing author Rudolfo Anaya approaches 80th birthday still writing, still dreaming



MARLA BROSE/JOURNAL

Albuquerque author Rudolfo Anaya, pictured here in silhouette at his West Side home, helped create contemporary Hispanic literature by writing about the people, places, triumphs and tragedies in his own life.

BY OLLIE REED JR.
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

It's been more than 60 years since the accident in the irrigation ditch, but acclaimed Albuquerque author Rudolfo Anaya can see it as clearly now as he did then — and from the same, unique vantage point he had on that summer afternoon.

Anaya, a teenager at the time, was living in Albuquerque's Barelmas community. There were no public swimming pools in Barelmas, so he and his friends went swimming in irrigation ditches in the South Valley. One day, somewhere south of Pajarito, Anaya dove into a ditch and slammed his head into the bottom, fracturing some vertebrae in his neck. He recalls that he lost consciousness briefly.

"I was face down in the water," he said during a recent interview at his home on Albuquerque's West Side. "When I opened my eyes, I could see sunlight in the water. Then I had an out-of-body experience. I could see myself floating up. I could see my body in the water. I could see my friends trying to get me out, and I could see the car where we had left it."

For much of his life, Anaya has been on the receiving end of visions, dreams, whispers from a world beyond the one we know, or, perhaps, just from so deep within himself it seems as if they come from another place.

These images, or sensations, or apparitions have punctuated his life and nourished his fiction. The trauma and the pain from that accident in the ditch fed the writing of 1979's "Tortuga," Anaya's third novel. But the symbols that emerged from his subconscious during that period, two months of which were spent in Carrie Tingley Hospital, are also vital to the book.

"Dreams are important. They are messengers," Anaya said. "Characters have appeared to me. They say, 'Here I am. Tell my story.'"

Can't do Hemingway

The stories Anaya's characters tell usually are closely linked to his own. From 1972's "Bless Me, Ultima," Anaya's first, best-known and most loved novel, to 2013's "The Old Man's Love Story," maybe his most moving and reflective work, Anaya writes about the people, the places, the culture and the challenges he knows best. His novels, short stories, children's books, essays, poetry and plays paint a literary mural of Hispanic life in both rural and urban New Mexico.

No small feat. In acknowledgement of that achievement and in recognition of his 80th birthday on Oct. 30, the city of Albuquerque has proclaimed this month Rudolfo Anaya Month. It's appropriate that October is also Hispanic Heritage Month because Anaya is considered one of the founders of contemporary Hispanic writing. No such thing was part of the curriculum when he studied literature at the University of New Mexico in the 1960s.

"We studied Faulkner, Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe," Anaya said. "Wolfe was the closest to how I felt and what I wanted to write about. He writes about his hometown in the South. But the (Hispanic) culture wasn't there. The language wasn't there. And it would have been ridiculous to write as Hemingway."

Anaya could not find any models or mentors to put him on the road to where he wanted to be as a writer. He started trying to find his own way while teaching at Harrison Middle School and, later, Valley High School, writing in the evenings after days in the classroom.

The first two novels he wrote have never been published. One is about a young girl in a welfare home.

"The theme is freedom," Anaya said. "What is freedom?"

The second is about a young pool player whose hands are mangled in retribution after he is falsely accused of hustling. Anaya was able to identify with some elements of this story.

"I didn't play billiards, but I played a lot of bumper pool in a lot of bars," he said. "That was fun — all my friends from Barelitas hanging out and drinking beer."

But it wasn't until he starting working on a novel based on his younger years in Guadalupe County that things began to fall into place. And even then it took some prodding from a phantom.

A vision in black

Anaya moved to Albuquerque with his family when he was about 16. But he was born in Pastura and raised in Santa Rosa. His mother's family lived in Puerto de Luna, 11 miles southeast of Santa Rosa. He has fond memories of those towns and those early years.

"I remember the birds and the animals and going down to the river with my dog to play," he said. "My grandparents and uncles who farmed in Puerto de Luna were so beautiful, I wanted to keep them around, to contain them."

Even Santa Rosa's town drunk was a "bigger-than-life" figure Anaya felt compelled to immortalize in his fiction. But it just wasn't happening until *Ultima* showed up.

In previous accounts, Anaya recalled the visit this way.

"I felt something behind me and I turned and there is this old woman



MARLA BROSE/JOURNAL

Oso, Rudolfo Anaya's long-haired dachshund, stands guard near the author's feet.

dressed in black and she asked me what I am doing. 'Well, I'm trying to write about my childhood, you know, growing up in that small town.' And she said, 'Well, you never will get it right until you put me in it.' I said, 'Well, who are you?' and she said, 'Ultima.'"

Ultima turned out to be a curandera, a healer who uses folk remedies. Unlike the town drunk and other characters in "Bless Me, Ultima," the title character was not someone Anaya had known when he was a kid.

"Now and then in my childhood, a curandera appeared because people used them," he said. "But there wasn't an *Ultima*."

The relationship between Anaya's young protagonist and the old healer provides the heart, the insistent pulse of "Bless Me, Ultima." The novel he had started writing in 1963 started to breathe on its own after she got into it. It was published in 1972, when Anaya was teaching at the late University of Albuquerque.

Everything changed then. The novel won the Premio Quinto Sol award for best novel written by a Chicano, and Anaya was soon invited to join UNM's English faculty. "Bless Me, Ultima" has sold several hundred thousand copies, has been made into a movie and is slated to be performed as an opera.

"That's where it all began," Anaya said.

Owls and ChupaCabras

It hasn't slowed up much. Anaya's latest children's book, "Owl in a Straw Hat," has just been published by the Museum of New Mexico

Press. (See David Steinberg's story on page 10.) He has completed a sequel to the "Owl" children's book and a manuscript for a novel, "ChupaCabra Meets Billy the Kid," is with his publisher.

The latter is the third in his "ChupaCabra" series, featuring college professor Rosa Medina and a fierce creature that may or may not exist. In this latest series entry, Medina is spending the summer in Puerto de Luna as she tries to write a novel about Billy the Kid. She is having a tough time with the book until the Kid shows up to give her some pointers.

"I hope it's out in spring, and I hope young people read it for fun," Anaya said. "But it's got a lot of science in it. They get to Billy's era through a wormhole (a hypothetical shortcut between widely separated points in space and time). And the other part of it is about Billy's time and his life."

Anaya retired from UNM more than 20 years ago, but he's still got some teacher in him.

Age and the lingering effects of that long-ago diving accident have taken their toll on his legs. He gets around in a wheelchair now.

But his wit is nimble, his eyes lively, his smile quick.

On this day, he is sitting at a table in his house, Oso, his 12-year-old, long-haired dachshund curled up at his feet. He glances out a window at a garden area.

"In summer that garden is full of hollyhocks," he said. "They're gone now."

Suddenly, it's apparent where Anaya got his inspiration for his 2012 children's book "How

Hollyhocks Came to New Mexico."

And it's a reminder that Anaya keeps the things and the people he loves alive in his writing. He clings to his parents, siblings, uncles and the sheer joy of his childhood in "Bless Me, Ultima." Anaya's own beloved wife Patricia, whom he calls Mimi, died nearly eight years ago. But he keeps her close to him in the pages of "The Old Man's Love Story."

The message that the times and persons we love are never lost, spans Anaya's body of work.

In "Bless Me, Ultima," young Tony, faced with the impending death of the curandera he cares about so deeply, is comforted when she says, "If despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills. I shall be with you."

And in "The Old Man's Love Story," the title character's late wife, speaking to him from the other side of life, says, "I am here as long as you remember me."

Reminded of that last line, Anaya nods toward the garden.

"Mimi died in early January (2010), but that summer I was sitting in my backyard enjoying the colorful hollyhocks when she appeared," he said. "I saw her spirit very clearly. And she said, 'I'm leaving now' and walked down the hollyhock path, taking her leave of me. But in a way Mimi has never left me. She is still my helper. She is here, as those I have loved on this earth and who have died are here, in my memory."

Visions, dreams, whispers from beyond or from within have always inspired Anaya, and they sustain him now.

Dream on

Anaya has just finished an essay about his old home place in Santa Rosa. Now that he's done with that, he said he might take a breather.

He's earned it, of course. He has been recognized with the NEA National Medal of Arts Lifetime Honor and the National Humanities Medal. He helped create the kind of literature he needed to write, blazing the trail for younger Hispanic writers such as Denise Chavez of Las Cruces and Luis Alberto Urrea.

But it's difficult to believe he'd be content to rest for long. Likely, his next novel, short story or play is just one dream, another messenger, away.

