

# Everyone is Doing It in October



**READ**

*Bless Me, Ultima*  
by Rudolfo Anaya

Promoting Reading and Community Discussion

## Presenters

Tucson-Pima Library Foundation  
Tucson-Pima Public Library

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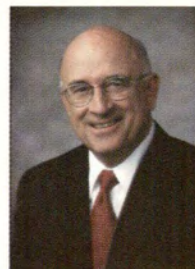
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## Message from the Mayor

Dear Fellow Tucsonans:

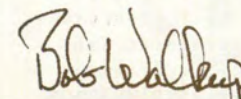
Something terrific caught my attention last year. Cities and their citizens are selecting one book for everyone to read together. They are meeting in groups large and small to talk about the book. Across different parts of their cities, they are discussing what the book has to tell about diverse communities and cultures living side by side. *One Book/One Community* projects have taken place in Seattle, Boston, Chicago and many other cities.

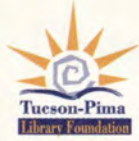
What is the effect of an entire community reading and talking together? We all end up on the same page. My office contacted the Tucson-Pima Library Foundation to find out if they could help organize a similar project.

But what would we read? One of Tucson's strengths is our cultural diversity. People have come from many directions to share in the eternal beauty and wonder of the mountains and desert. We all love the colorful, the historical, the artistically rich life of this borderland; and at the same time Tucsonans want a future that combines high technology with a high quality of life and place. We would have to choose our book carefully to get many Tucsonans interested and involved.

Together with the Foundation we formed a list of well-received novels meeting certain criteria to ensure the greatest participation. These novels are available in both English and Spanish, in large type, and on audio tape. Then we appointed a diverse selection committee and established a rating system. In the end, the committee selected *Bless Me, Ultima*, by Rudolfo Anaya. I am also pleased to announce that Mr. Anaya will join us in a community-wide discussion on October 16, 2002 ("A Night With Anaya"). Stay tuned for more details on all the events, book discussion groups and presentations across Tucson in the weeks to come.

So, here we are, ready for a great read. I hope you enjoy *Bless Me, Ultima*, recommend it to your family and friends, join in the many *One Book/One Community* discussions around Tucson, and come back for more next year!

  
Mayor Bob Walkup



## The Tucson-Pima Library Foundation

When a call came from Mayor Walkup's office asking if we would like to organize a local *One Book/One Community* project, we were looking for a way to let Tucsonans know about the Foundation. We had heard about and considered this popular program, which started with the Washington Center for the Book hosting "If All of Seattle Read the Same Book" through the 22 branches of the Seattle Public Library.

Our purpose is not unlike the Center's - "to celebrate the written word" and to "encourage reading, writing, and the exchange of ideas evoked by literature and the humanities." The Foundation, established in 1999, maintains a permanent endowment to support the services and programs of the Tucson-Pima Public Library. We emphasize the importance of reading. For that reason, we have included teachers in our planning. Students at Tucson High, Flowing Wells, Catalina Foothills, Amphitheater, Pueblo and Cholla and The University of Arizona will be reading *Bless Me, Ultima* in their classrooms.

Our greatest hope is that many people will take time to read and discuss this novel along with their neighbors and co-workers. Not only will that act of faith in books unite us in our appreciation of our regional heritage, but it will unite us in supporting education in its broadest sense, across all ages, cultures, belief systems, and careers.

- Tucson-Pima Library Foundation Board

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## Community Events

### **One Book/One Community Kick-off Party**

Tuesday, October 1, 5:00 p.m.  
Hotel Congress  
311 E. Congress Ave.

The Michael Ronstadt Trio  
Local Personalities Reading from *Bless Me, Ultima*  
Refreshments and **No-Host Bar**

### **A Night With Anaya**

Wednesday, October 16, 7:00 p.m.  
Proscenium Theatre, Pima Community College West Campus  
2202 W. Anklam Rd.

What does *Bless Me, Ultima* represent to the author? What does it mean to scholars and to regional writers?

- ✿ Rudolfo Anaya, Author of *Bless Me, Ultima*
- ✿ Roberto Cantú, Ph.D., California State University at Los Angeles
- ✿ Ana Perches, Senior Lecturer, Spanish and Portuguese, University of Arizona
- ✿ Patricia Preciado Martin, Author of *Songs My Mother Sang*
- ✿ Donna Swaim, Senior Lecturer Emerita, Humanities Program, University of Arizona



Arizona Humanities Council

"A Night With Anaya"  
is made possible in part by a grant  
from the Arizona Humanities Council

# Rudolfo A. Anaya

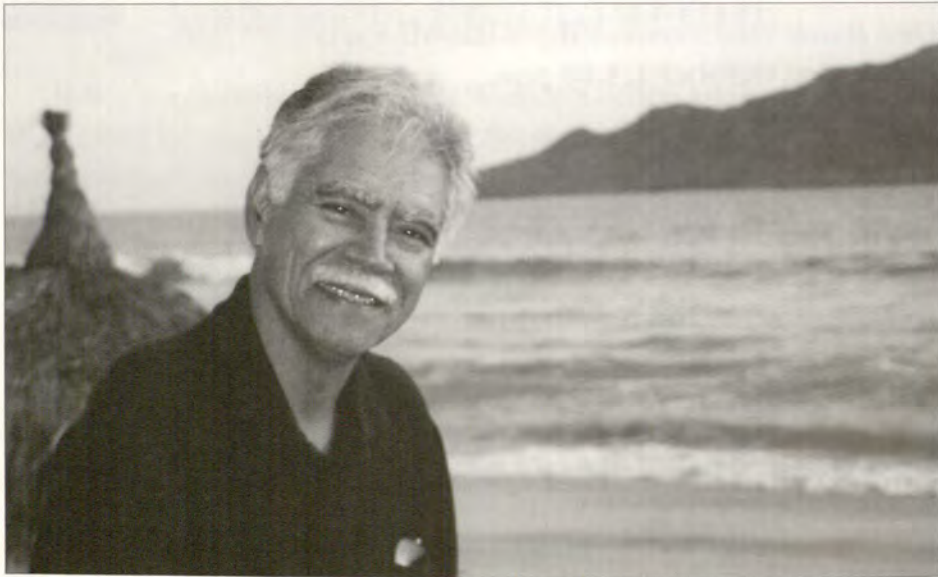
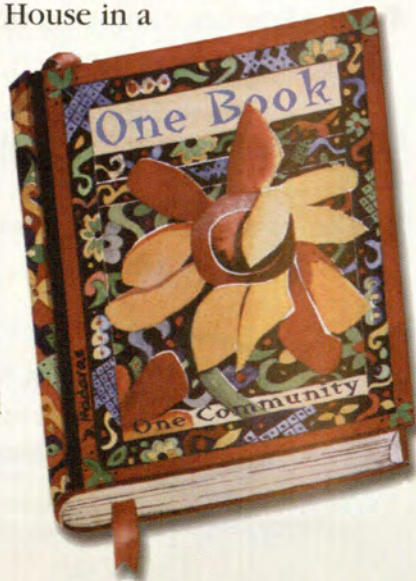


PHOTO BY: MIMI

The author of *Bless Me, Ultima* this year was awarded the National Medal of Arts for his “exceptional contribution to contemporary American literature that has brought national recognition to the traditions of the Chicano people, and for his efforts to promote Hispanic writers.” This was not his first recognition by a President of the United States. In 1980 Rudolfo Anaya was invited to read at the White House in a Salute to American Poets and Writers. He has been awarded seven honorary Doctor (Ph.D.) degrees.

Born in Pastura, New Mexico, in 1937, Anaya grew up in circumstances similar to those in the small town of his narrator, Antonio, and like Antonio, he was destined to be a man of learning. Anaya began his distinguished career as Professor of Language and Literature at the University of New Mexico in 1974.



*Bless Me, Ultima*, published in 1972, was Anaya’s first novel. He continued writing novels (including three mysteries) through the subsequent decades; he also wrote plays, stories, essays and an epic poem. His works, lauded for their descriptive and sensory powers, reflect on changes occurring in the Southwest and the contrasts and transformations people have experienced who leave their small rural communities, with cultural and social life steeped in nature, folklore and spirituality, for urban centers shaped by science and technology.

## What the Critics Say

*Bless Me, Ultima*, first published in 1972, became a best seller, and Anaya was widely credited with founding the Chicano Movement in literature. But, as Roberto Cantú pointed out in 1986, “...Anaya criticism...continues to struggle over the meaning (literary, cultural, or political) of *Bless Me, Ultima*.” What is its worldview? Is it Aztec? Is it magical? Is it romantic? Is it a “Chicano novel” or not? And what do we call the narrator, Antonio - a curandero? A trickster? An activist? Is he a prophet?

What is its worldview?  
Is it Aztec?  
Is it magical?  
Is it romantic?  
Is it a “Chicano novel”  
or not?

Cantú asks us to look at the storytelling conventions: Antonio, before a live audience, explains his inability in childhood to comprehend the unusual events that followed the arrival of the old woman and her owl. The listeners, apparently, are unacquainted with the circumstances and customs in Antonio’s early life. They are perhaps urbanized. Through his reminiscences of the pastoral and magical landscape of the 1940s and the portentous events — clan conflict, the coming of the railroad and wire fences, the dividing up of the llano into individual properties, and the atomic bomb —

they sense a loss of another way of being. The narrative turns and wanders, presenting fragments of Native American, Christian, and Anglo icons and emblems of order, but the apocalyptic vision drives the plot to its climactic end.

Critic Héctor Calderón, writing about the same time, cautions the reader against the impression of realism. The work is hard to label. He notes that critics have tried to define it as folklore, as a quasi-religious text, and as a typical Wild West action tale. Calderón places the novel in the genre of romance. Anglo American and Hispanic elites, he contends, aided by the Federal Writers Project of the 1930s, conspired to give the Southwest a reputation of idyllic beauty, with wide and empty landscapes, a perfect stage for myths. He points to Anaya's use of Hispanic archetypes of male leadership, conquistador and priest, and to the hero's Odysseus-like adventures. In Anaya's New Mexico there is high contrast between heroes and villains. The rural society portrayed lives in a world where discourse is oral, influenced by a complex of cultural myths. Calderón also sees traces of the educated author's interest in Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and critic Northrop Frye. He detects Jungian psychology: it is about women in the unconscious and our relationship to nature. And, ultimately, it is about cultural transformation, a displacement of myths by books.

Source: Rudolfo A. Anaya: Focus on Criticism, edited by César A. González-T. (Special Collections, The University of Arizona).

## Further Study

Anaya, Rudolfo. *Bless Me, Ultima*. Warner Books, 1999. This edition contains an Introduction by Rudolfo Anaya, "Q and A with Rudolfo Anaya," and "Questions for Discussion."

Olmos, Margarite Fernandez. *Rudolfo A. Anaya A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Press. 1999.

Scott, Warren; Bill Thies; Ryan Howley; Rob Groves; and Eleanor Norton. *Bless Me, Ultima*. 1996. <http://www.ed.psu.edu/k-12/ultima/>. (March, 2002) This site was created by students at State College Area High School in State College, PA. Sections include biographical information, symbolism, the role of dreams, themes, the role of culture, and links to other relevant sites.

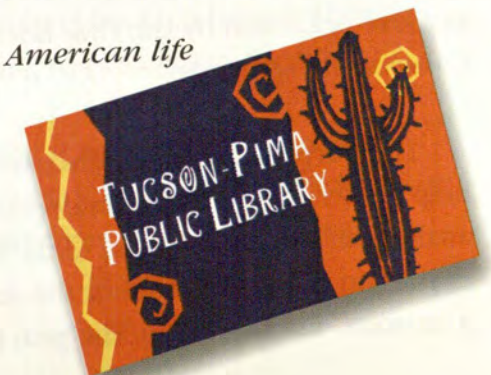
Garcia, Rosie, and Brenda Holmes. "Curanderisimo." *Rudolfo Anaya*. 2000. <http://web.nmsu.edu/~tomlynch/swlit.anaya.html>. 2002. This site by students in Southwestern Literature at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, has biographical information, student comments, and links to other relevant sites.

## Suggested Readings

If you enjoyed reading *Bless Me, Ultima*, you may also enjoy ...

*Nobody's son: notes from an American life*  
by Luis Alberto Urrea

*House on Mango Street*  
by Sandra Cisneros



## Suggested Readings (continued)

*La Maravilla*  
by Alfred V́ea, Jr.

*El Guero: A True Adventure Story*  
by Elizabeth Borton de Trevino

*Jesse*  
by Gary Soto

*First Confession*  
by Montserrat Fontes

## Tips for Discussion Groups

*Bless Me, Ultima* will be discussed at many sites around the city, including libraries, neighborhood centers and bookstores. All Tucsonans are encouraged to join these sessions led by trained facilitators, but if you cannot find one conveniently located or scheduled for your participation, try to have a discussion wherever you can. Gather some readers on lunch break at work, for example, or around the kitchen table. The following tips apply to informal book discussions as well as those organized by the *One Book/One Community* sponsors.

The purpose of a book discussion is to help readers deepen their understanding of a book through closer analysis and an exchange of ideas. The leader is not expected to be an expert on either literature or the subject of the book, or to present a "correct" interpretation. The goal is for all of the participants to be



... on lunch  
break  
...  
or around  
the kitchen  
table

able to clarify for themselves and perhaps express their own understandings and appreciation of the novel.

Groups might agree on some discussion ground rules, keeping in mind:

- Lively and fruitful discussion will be driven by the participants' interests and questions. For this project, there are no required points to cover or universal understandings to reach.
- The unique content and direction of any book discussion will depend on many factors: whether the participants are an established group or unacquainted individuals; how serious they are about reading novels; how long they have lived in the Southwest; where they have come from; and their generation's experiences, for example. If possible, take time to find out about the group and get acquainted before discussion begins.
- The most stimulating questions to get discussion going are broad questions for which there are no clear answers. Consider asking, "What was your reaction to the book?" as a simple way to start.
- Discussion is best limited to the book. It is too easy to get sidetracked when members engage in extended personal stories.
- Discussion stays on track if speakers back up their opinions or questions by quoting or referring to passages in the book.
- Discussion is dialogue among the members of the group, not exchanges between two members or a leader and individuals. It is important to prevent a few members from dominating the conversation.

- Everyone should be encouraged to speak and to listen.
- Should the discussion lag, or eyes and minds not light up, see the questions in the next section of the guide. New approaches might rekindle the conversation, and take more fruitful paths.

To find out where the many *One Book/One Community* discussions groups are scheduled and when, ask your librarian, or consult the website <http://www.lib.ci.tucson.az.us/pageturners/>.

## A Few Questions To Keep Your Discussions Lively

- Bless Me, Ultima* focuses on the formative years of a male child who is living with his family in a small, rural community in New Mexico in the early 1940s. In what ways is this novel interesting or useful to men and women living in our large, urban community sixty years later?
- What are the major themes of the novel?
- Antonio was surrounded by three significant adults. What are their influences and what claims do they make on Antonio?
- Is Ultima, *La Grande*, a believable character? What about the boy, Antonio? Have you known people like them? What qualities and behaviors ring true? Which are harder to understand? Do the time and setting of the story make them more or less real to you?
- What do you think of the tension between Antonio's parents about how he should live his life? What literary purpose do you

suppose Anaya had in drawing the parents as so different in their values? What is the basis for their opposing hopes for their son?

- Why do you think Anthony's brothers are referred to as "giants"? What do they symbolize? What purpose do they have in the story?
- Did you like/dislike Antonio's schoolmates? Are we supposed to like them? How did they influence Antonio? Discuss, for example, how Anaya portrays Horse, and why he might have been included in the cast of characters. What about Jasón? Cico?
- Would you call Antonio's world violent? What other words would you use to describe it?
- Is this a novel about religion? Would Antonio make a good priest?
- How is "power" portrayed in this novel? How is "weakness" portrayed?
- How do you explain the golden carp: (a) as an influence on Antonio, (b) on Cico, and (b) as a story device?
- What other myths and symbols are used in this story?
- What is the significance of water in the story (the river, Blue Lake, Hidden Lake, the family name Márez, etc.)?
- A drowning has been portrayed before in novels and movies. Is there anything special about the one in *Bless Me, Ultima*?

- ? How did you feel about Antonio's dreams and especially the *pesadillas* as you encountered them? Is this a good novelistic device? Why?
- ? Explain the cure of Antonio's uncle. Explain Tenorio's daughters.
- ? What changed during the course of events in this story? What did Antonio learn? What does Antonio's future hold?
- ? Antonio wonders why God lets bad things happen to good people. What does Anaya say about punishment and forgiveness?
- ? Are we seeing Antonio's world strictly through Antonio's eyes? Could Anaya have written the novel from the point of view of the mother? Ultima? Father Byrne? Why or why not? If you could tell Antonio's story from another point of view, whose would you choose?
- ? How would you categorize this novel or describe its purpose? Why is it considered a classic?
- ? Does a reader have to know Spanish to appreciate and understand this story? Did you look words up in a Spanish dictionary? Were the words all there?
- ? Is Ultima good or evil, a witch or a god? What does her name signify? Do you know an Ultima?

Everyone is Doing  
It in October!

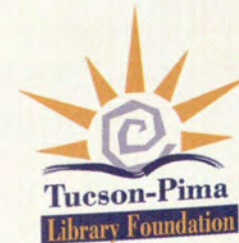


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 Ernesto Portillo, Jr.  
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 Harriet Scarborough  
 Donna Swaim  
 Ofelia Zepeda

"It is a landmark in southwestern literature and a seminal work of Chicano fiction. But it is also a classic coming-of-age story that speaks eloquently to universal themes of faith, family, culture and respect for the past that are increasingly important as we move toward a global community."

- Bruce Dinges  
 Director of Publications  
 Arizona Historical Society



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**Rejoice in reading!**



**Celebrate Tucson's heritage & culture!**



**Come together in dialogue!**



**Learn about your library's  
rich resources!**



"Phenomenal read for all ages and interests."

*Kendal Nystedt*

- Kendal Nystedt  
Catalina Foothills High School Student



"The power of culture and tradition is brought forth  
in a mystical way in Rodolfo Anaya's **Bless Me,  
Ultima. Leer es poder.**"

*Liz Rodriguez Miller*

- Liz Rodriguez Miller  
Assistant City Manager



"The *One Book/One Community* project is a  
unique, effective way to bring the community  
together, while emphasizing the importance of  
reading and its role in society. The book chosen,  
**Bless Me, Ultima**, is an excellent choice since it  
celebrates and focuses on the diversity and our  
southwestern cultural heritage."

*Sharon Bronson*

- Sharon Bronson, Chair  
Pima County Board of Supervisors