Jalamanta

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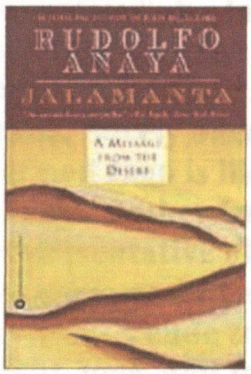

WORLD LITERATURE IN REVIEW: ENGLISH

Rudolfo Anaya. Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert. New York. Warner.

1996. x + 194 pages. $17.95. ISBN 0-446- 52024-1.

In January of 1996 a writer for Publishers Weekly, that chronicler of esthetically noteworthy textual effluvia, fell to reviewing Rudolfo Anaya's Jalamanta. The less-than-exhilarated reviewer found it "a sharp departure from the yeasty realism that won [Anaya] a large readership," ultimately labeling it a "preachy New Age parable" with "lofty sentiments" which become "somewhat platitudinous with repetition." I wish I could be as gentle.

Far and away, this is Anaya's most misbegotten literary experiment. Warner Books' publicity hacks remind us on the book's dust jacket how Jalamanta comes from a scribe Tony Hillerman dubbed the "godfather and guru of Chicano literature"; they only succeed at increasing the disappointment. No Bless Me, Ultima, Jalamanta offers its readers a visit to a dystopic, mystical, allegorical terrain trod before by Frank Herbert and Carlos Castaneda. Juxtaposed as such, it does not come off very well.

Anaya's novel is set in and around a fictional "Seventh City of the Fifth Sun" and tells the story, of Fatimah and her love, the exiled rebel teacher Jalamanta, ne Amado. While waiting thirty long years for his return, Fatimah and her people live the sorry life of exploited exiles, "people who many years ago had revolted against the authorities," "outcast[s] from their homes in the city." The enemy are brownshirted forces of order, "authorities" who use "sacred books to oppress."

Dominant motifs in Anaya's morality play include lights and veils, hence the telling name "Jalamanta," "he who strips away the veils that blind the soul"--an important issue, we know, as Anaya reminds us repeatedly: dark is bad; light is good. No sartorial Beau Brummel he, Jalamanta's only material accessory is a "weathered staff made from the twisted roots of a desert tree, crowned by the carved heads of two entwined snakes." Said staff once again resounding Anaya's binary emphases.

Speaking of binaries, Jalamanta has two boyhood friends: "Santos," a saintly (get it?) friend who "spends his time reading holy books"; and "Iago," Jalamanta's betrayer, a "wine merchant" whose "ways are secretive." An Iago as traitor--how novel! As the book slowly paces toward its tragic, totally anticipated climax, you almost wish Jalamanta had sat through a performance of Shakespeare's Othello during his exile. Surely Jalamanta should know that trusting one's fate to a man named Iago is like mortgaging your house through a loan shark. Anaya's other bad guys are no more subtle. Take "Vende," a representative of the central authorities, who "dresse[s] in a brown uniform and black boots" with a "cap sewn [with] an insignia of three skulls." Vende translates as "sell" or "he sells." Selling, bad; veils, bad; light, love, and truth, good. This is the structure of Anaya's experiment.

Jalamanta's patient lover Fatimah is a "healer"--no doubt echoing for fans of Anaya and of his singularly important first novel the memory of Ultima, the curandera in Bless Me, Ultima. I have read Bless Me, Ultima, written about Bless Me, Ultima, and Fatimah, you are no Ultima. Consider this: most of the book, Fatimah (Our Lady of?) waits around for Jalamanta and then quietly supports his absurdly monomaniacal quest. No day job, Jalamanta's whole vocation is that of "seeker." In his own words: "I have wandered in the desert seeking the truth."

Other problems derail Anaya's fable. At times, the writing is this side of a Barbara Cartland romance; Fabio would be at home on the cover of the paperback version. Imagine Harlequin Books inviting Castaneda or Herbert to author novels for them and you might not be surprised at some of the following riffs: "I offer you the kiss of life," [Jalamanta] said, feeling the surge of love flowing between them, the energies of their souls becoming a filament of light in the stream of sunlight." The romantic scenes are hard to get through--one motif, the Holy Grail, is used to an extent surpassed only by the comedy troupe Monty Python, and that was for comedy. One sample suffices: "[Fatimah] was the Holy Grail of [Jalamanta's] dreams."

In the end Jalamanta brings about his own arrest by declaring that by allowing our souls to be filled with light, we are "becoming god." As might be anticipated, the brown-shifted authorities are not too keen on this kind of blasphemy; neither are they so finely attuned to the allegorical nature of Jalamanta's doublespeak. They take him at his word and throw him in chains. The final chapter of the novel is aptly named "Betrayal." There Anaya's readers witness lago's inevitable betrayal of Jalamanta to the authorities. A teacher and wise sage man,

he should have seen it coming.

Speaking of allegory, betrayal here can read in two ways, for the term aptly characterizes "guru" Anaya's treatment of his readers. While cynical, I am not so churlish as to suggest the book has no redeeming qualities; when Jalamanta reminds us how "the germ of creation lies in chaos," one dreams of what might have been if the novel itself could have more chaos.

In recent years Anaya has tried his hand at detective fiction, travel narrative, and now, with Jalamanta, ethereal allegory-he certainly cannot be accused of resting on his laurels. While we should champion this restless spirit which drives Anaya to new prose and fictional forms, we should also not be surprised when this restlessness leads our godfather down the wrong back alley.

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