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## **`Ultima' author Anaya knows book has fans, critics**

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By Dustin Block

Journal Times

Since Rudolfo Anaya's novel "Bless Me, Ultima" was published in 1972, it has received exorbanant praise for its look into the life and soul of a Chicano boy and his family.

Anaya sends "Antonio Marez," a 6-year-old boy, in search of answers to big questions about life and spirituality. Along the way, using a poetic mix of English and Spanish language, he touches on topics ranging from boyhood teasing to adult struggles with the decisions that have shaped their lives.

The book is part of a revolution in Chicano literature that has since grown to include dozens of authors and mainstream acceptance. But while "Bless Me, Ultima" has received widespread support, it has raised ire along with acclaim.

The novel is one of the most banned books in the United States, with critics dubbing the novel sacrilegious and dangerous. Anaya dismissed the claims, which he says always come from people who never read the book. For those who have taken in the story, they typically find a deeply religious tale that stretches into areas few books - Christian or not - have the courage, or understanding, to tread.

During a recent phone interview with Anaya from his home in New Mexico, the setting for "Bless Me, Ultima," the now famous author talked about the religious issues he raised in his novel, his would-be censors and role of Chicano literature in United States schools.

Journal Times: Religion is central to the characters in "Bless Me, Ultima." While everyone in the book is Catholic, they also follow many beliefs from the native religions in place long before the Spanish appeared. Have the two belief systems melded together?

Anaya: "Precisely, both influences that we have here, the Native American and the Hispanic, living side by side for over four centuries, creates a communal bond and the people just learn from each other. They respected each other's ceremonies, and always Hispanics that would go into the Indian pueblo and learn the language and learn the ceremonies - and the Indians would learn about the Catholic religion."

JT: Ultima, a main character in the book, seems to travel freely between both worlds. Did you envision her as being part of one religion? Many religions? No religions?

Anaya: "I think she draws from both worlds, and probably more. Spirituality can occur without being in a religion. There are people so wise and who have such large souls, you might say, that they can incorporate so much. In doing that they can help so much, and they are respected in all these multicultural worlds we have and are able to absorb from the different sources."

JT: It seems this is the main reason people have wanted to ban "Bless Me, Ultima."

Anaya: "One thing that I've learned about the censorship cases around "Bless Me, Ultima" - the people who censor the book usually haven't read it. The student may take it home, read a word or two, or a paragraph, and the student might say Ultima is a witch. If you read the book in its entirety, you realize this is not a manual on witchcraft, that that's not the point. Yes, the language may be harsh at times, but it has a point at each scene, it's not thrown in gratuitously."

JT: Have you ever met with people who want to censor your work?

Anaya: "Every time something like that happens, I can trust the community. The students will get together, the teachers will read the book, sometimes parents will get involved. In every single case of censorship I know of, when the community reads the book they (the censors) have been overturned. I really trust the community - I don't have to defend the book."

JT: Could you talk about the growth of the Chicano culture since you published, "Bless Me, Ultima?" Certainly things have changed over the past 30 years.

Anaya: "Yes and no ... People still ask me, 'When did your family come from Mexico?' I'm from New Mexico, and we've been here a long time. We didn't go to the United States, the United States came to us.

I guess the point is that the mainstream American society had been aware for a long time that Hispanics were here ... now it's a matter of the country becoming aware of the Hispanic communities, and doing what needs to be done for them.

That's what is so wonderful in Racine. People will read about it, and get educated. That's what I like about your project ... that I get people to learn about their neighbors."

JT: Art, in your case, writing seems to be a good way to bring people together.

Anaya: "That's the key. Literature and art and music are what help people look into the soul of the other community. I like western music and Johnny Cash. I grew up with rock 'n roll and Fats Domino. Now I even listen to rap. So I believe looking at the arts of the community, especially literature, encourages young people to learn about other communities.

I wrote an essay once in which I made the point that Chicano literature has to be in the classroom so Chicano children could read something. Non-Hispanic kids have to read it too. We don't live separate, so it's valuable to have literature in the classroom for both groups, for many groups.

JT: Not just a one-way flow of American culture to all students.

Anaya: That was our education. We understand the American mainstream culture as well as anyone, they just don't understand us. Maybe that's changing. More and more of our literature is accepted into the literature of our schools.

The Journal Times' interview with Rudolfo Anaya will be continued in the future as part of the newspaper's month-long series of articles celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month.