

Rudolfo Anaya, a Father of Chicano Literature, Dies at 82

His coming-of-age novel “Bless Me, Ultima” reframed the way many in New Mexico viewed their own history, even as school districts tried to ban it.

By Simon Romero

Published July 3, 2020 Updated July 4, 2020, 9:38 a.m. ET

Rudolfo Anaya, a writer whose trailblazing explorations of the folkways of the Southwest helped define the Latino experience in the United States, died on Sunday at his home in Albuquerque. He was 82.

His niece Belinda Henry said his death followed a long illness.

Mr. Anaya burst onto the American literary scene in 1972 with his novel “Bless Me, Ultima,” about a Chicano boy growing up just after World War II in the llano, or plains, of hardscrabble eastern New Mexico.

Published when Chicano scholars and activists were questioning Anglo dominance of the Southwest, the book describes the guidance provided by Ultima, an elderly healer who uses herbal remedies and other Native American traditions incorporated over centuries into New Mexico’s Hispanic culture. A major theme in the book is the tension between Roman Catholicism and the spiritual practices embodied by Ultima.

The novel reframed the way many in New Mexico viewed their own history, prioritizing the blending of mythologies, bloodlines and religious practices over simplistic attempts to characterize the culture in which Mr. Anaya was raised as Spanish.

“Bless Me, Ultima” repeatedly drew the ire of censors, who cited what they viewed as foul language and anti-Catholic messaging.

The book was banned in California, Colorado and even Mr. Anaya’s own state, New Mexico. In 1981, the school board in Bloomfield, N.M., burned copies of “Bless Me, Ultima,” according to a news report in The Albuquerque Journal that Mr. Anaya sometimes showed visitors.

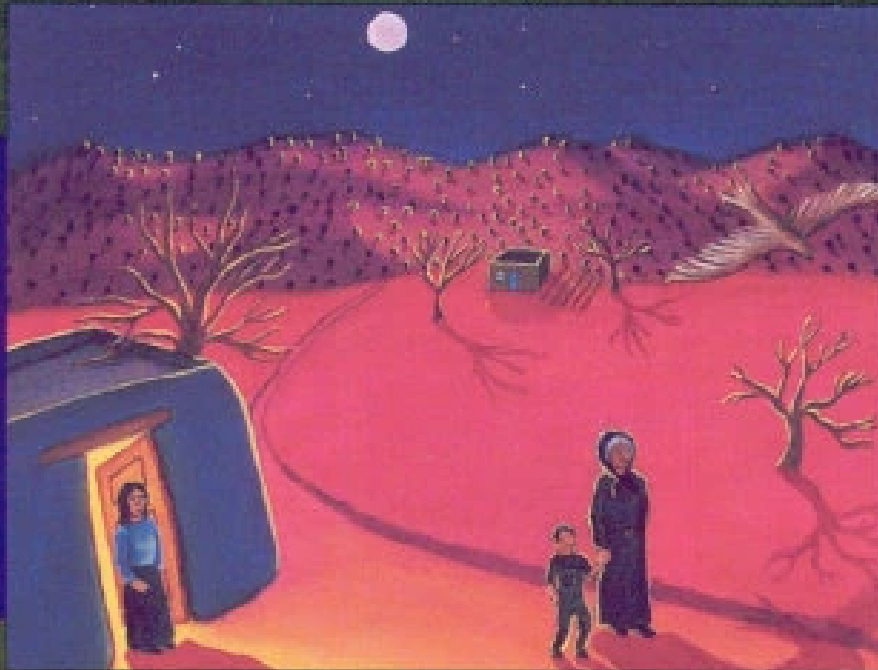
In 2012, the state of Arizona forced teachers in Tucson to ban the book and dismantle Mexican-American studies programs, part of a nativist push to curb immigration and limit the influence of Latinos.

As is often the case, the censorship efforts bestowed new prominence on “Bless Me, Ultima,” lifting sales of the book while cementing Mr. Anaya’s standing as a leading figure in the literary movement forged by Chicanos in the 1970s.

THE CLASSIC BY
RUDOLFO ANAYA
Author of *Albuquerque*



BLESS ME, ULTIMA



"ONE OF THE NATION'S FOREMOST
CHICANO LITERARY ARTISTS."
—*Denver Post*

WARNER BOOKS



Mr. Anaya's novel "Bless Me, Ultima," published in 1972, was banned in many school districts for its profanity and what critics saw as an anti-Catholic message. The censorship efforts boosted both the book's sales and Mr. Anaya's reputation.

Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya was born on Oct. 30, 1937, in Pastura, N.M., a small farming village. He was the eighth of 10 children in a Spanish-speaking family whose presence in this part of the West predated the American conquest of New Mexico in the 1840s.

His mother, Rafaelita Máres Anaya, came from a family of farmers; his father, Martín, came from a family of vaqueros, who herded cattle and sheep around the Llano Estacado, the tablelands encompassing parts of eastern New Mexico and northwestern Texas.

"We were all poor, and had the curanderas — the healers — that helped," Mr. Anaya said in a 2016 interview with The Las Cruces Sun-News. "We had the vaqueros, the cowboys, who came in and out of the village. On Saturday evenings, my dad would take out a guitar, and somebody would bring beer, and my dad would sing some of the old New Mexico songs."

"All of that," he added, "crawled into my DNA."

When Mr. Anaya was 14, his family moved to Albuquerque, part of the postwar migration boom from rural New Mexico to the state's largest city. They settled in the barrio of Barelitas, not far from downtown. At 16, he suffered a spinal cord injury after diving into an irrigation canal, a harrowing experience that left him temporarily paralyzed and served as inspiration for a later novel.

After graduating from the University of New Mexico with a degree in English, Mr. Anaya taught in Albuquerque's public schools while writing and accumulating rejections from publishers. After "Bless Me, Ultima" was published by Quinto Sol, an independent Chicano publishing house founded at the University of California, Berkeley, it went on to sell hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide.

Mr. Anaya followed "Bless Me, Ultima" with "Heart of Aztlán" (1976) and "Tortuga" (1979), completing a trilogy about Chicano identity and empowerment.

He also wrote a mystery series featuring the Chicano detective Sonny Baca; children's books including "Farolitos for Abuelo" (1998); travel chronicles like "A Chicano in China" (1986); and story collections including "The Silence of the Llano" (1982).



In presenting Mr. Anaya the National Humanities Medal in 2016, President Barack Obama said, “His works of fiction and poetry celebrate the Chicano experience and reveal universal truths about the human condition.” Al Drago/The New York Times

Still, “Bless Me, Ultima” endured as Mr. Anaya’s best-known book, adapted into a play, an opera and a 2013 feature film.

Mr. Anaya, a longtime childhood literacy advocate, and his wife, Patricia, who died in 2010, used proceeds from his book sales to establish a scholarship fund for underprivileged youth in New Mexico. They also frequently lent their guesthouse in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico to writers in need of a quiet place to work.

In 2016, Mr. Anaya received the National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama for his “pioneering stories of the American Southwest.”

“His works of fiction and poetry celebrate the Chicano experience and reveal universal truths about the human condition,” Mr. Obama said. “And as an educator, he has spread a love of literature to new generations.”

Mr. Anaya is survived by two stepdaughters, Elynn Cowden and Melissa Messec, and three grandchildren.

While known as a literary figure, Mr. Anaya also cultivated a mischievous side, which he revealed in a series of wine reviews, sprinkled with New Mexican Spanish, that he submitted to Alibi, Albuquerque’s alternative news weekly.

“It was ready to breathe! It had life! Like a foal just dropped and kicking, I could tell this vino was heady, strong; no effete fragrance here,” Mr. Anaya wrote in a 2008 review of a limited-edition Rioja red from Bodegas LAN. “Anda, let’s party!”

Mr. Anaya was also a prominent progressive voice in New Mexico politics on issues like civil rights, water rights and immigration.

“Let’s continue helping the least fortunate among us,” Mr. Anaya said last year in a handwritten note to Albuquerque’s mayor, Tim Keller, expressing gratitude for the sheltering of asylum seekers from Latin America. (Mr. Keller shared the note in a Facebook tribute to Mr. Anaya.) “We are all one family.”

Correction: July 4, 2020

An earlier version of this obituary misstated the given name of Mr. Anaya's wife, who died in 2010. It was Patricia, not Priscilla.

Simon Romero is a national correspondent based in Albuquerque, covering immigration and other issues. He was previously the bureau chief in Brazil and in Caracas, Venezuela, and reported on the global energy industry from Houston. @viaSimonRomero