

Rudolfo Anaya: 1937—: Author Biography

An acclaimed Chicano writer, Rudolfo Anaya has become best known for his award-winning novels, such as *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Tortuga* (1979), and *Albuquerque* (1992). Anaya, who taught at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque for nineteen years before retiring in 1993, has also published epic poems, short stories, nonfiction, plays, and children's books. He has been credited as a leader in the Latino literary community for his groundbreaking style and his success in writing stories that capture the essence of the Chicano experience.

Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya was born on October 30, 1937, in the small town of Pastura, New Mexico, to Martín and Rafaelita (Mares) Anaya. Anaya's father, who came from a family of cattle workers and sheep-herders, was a *vaquero*, a horseman who worked on the ranches surrounding Pastura, and his mother came from a family of poor farmers, who were devote Catholics. Anaya, who was the fifth of seven children, saw his parents as the two halves of his life—the wildness and uncertainty of the windswept plains of east central New Mexico and the stable domesticity of farm life. Soon after he was born Anaya's family moved to Santa Rosa, New Mexico, where Anaya spent the next fourteen years. Later, his writings would be filled with images and memories of the people who affected his childhood. His fiction draws heavily on the superstitions and myths of the Mexican-American culture that commingled with the traditions of the Roman Catholic faith. In the community's rich storytelling tradition, legend and history were blended together to create stories filled with mystery and revelation.

Anaya spent his childhood on the *llano*, the plains, roaming the countryside with his friends, hunting, and fishing and swimming in the Pecos River. He was taught the catechism in Spanish, often asking the priest and his older sisters difficult questions about their faith. Spanish was spoken in the home, and Anaya was not introduced to English until he went to school. Despite the shock of changing languages, Anaya was motivated by his mother, who held education in high regard, to excel at his studies. For Anaya, life was filled with unanswered questions, but he knew that he had a place within the very mystery that belied his understanding.

Life in the small, close-knit community of Santa Rosa gave Anaya a sense of security and belonging that was torn from him when his family moved to Albuquerque in 1952. In Albuquerque Anaya was introduced to a cultural and ethnic diversity he had not previously experienced, as well as the painful reality of racism and prejudice aimed at Latinos. Nonetheless, Anaya's teenage years were in many ways typical. He played football and baseball, and spent a significant amount of time with his friends discussing cars, girls, and music. In school he maintained good grades and avoided the troubles and dangers of gang life.

At a Glance . . .

Born October 30, 1937, in Pastura, New Mexico; son of Martín and Rafaelita (Mares) Anaya; married Patricia Lawless, July 21, 1966. *Education*: Attended Browning Business School, 1956-58; Univ. of NM, B.A., English, 1963; M.A., English, 1968; M.A., guidance and counseling, 1972.

Career: Albuquerque Public Schools, teacher, 1963-70; Univ. of Albuquerque, director of counseling, 1971-73; Univ. of NM, associate professor, 1974-88; professor of English, 1988-93; professor emeritus, 1993–.

When he was sixteen, while swimming in an irrigation ditch with friends, Anaya suffered a diving accident that changed the course of his adolescence. Diving into the ditch, Anaya broke two vertebrae in his neck and nearly died. His convalescence was long and painful, but after spending the summer in the hospital, Anaya, fiercely determined to return to his active lifestyle, eventually recovered from his injuries. The experience produced in the teenage boy a passion for life and an appreciation for the ability of adversity to either destroy or reshape one's existence.

After graduating from Albuquerque High School in 1956, Anaya attended a business school, intending to become an accountant. When his studies proved unfulfilling, he enrolled in the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. If the move to Albuquerque as a young teenager had rocked Anaya's world, university life sent him into a full-fledged

identity crisis. He was a Mexican American in a social and academic setting dominated by a culture that was not his own. He found his classes devoid of relevance to his history or culture. Also, English was still his second language, and he often used speech patterns that were considered wrong by his English-speaking classmates and professors. He felt different, isolated, and alienated, with no mentors to guide or support him.

Anaya's own questions of his place in the world as a Latino, coupled with the traditional angst of moving into adulthood and the emotional pain caused by a recently failed relationship with a girl, pushed him to write as a cathartic exercise. Much of these early writings he later destroyed. Also, a freshman English class sparked his interest in literature, and he began to read poetry and novels. Despite his growing love for reading, Anaya continued to lament the absence of any authors who could serve as mentors for his unique Mexican-American experience. In 1963 Anaya graduated from the university with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. He took a teaching position in a small New Mexico town and continued to practice his writing every day. In 1966 he married Patricia Lawless, who supported her husband's desire to write and served as his editor.

During the 1960s, Anaya taught junior high and high school during the day and worked on his writing after school and in the evenings, struggling to find his literary voice. Although he conjured up images of his past, he found that he was writing in a style foreign to that past. The words and the characters would not mix. Then Anaya had something of a mystical experience that pushed him toward the development of his own unique Mexican-American style. As he labored over his writing one night, he turned to see an elderly woman dressed in black standing in his room. This vision spurred the writer into action and a story began to flow from his pen, inspiring his first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*. The old woman in black he had seen that night became Ultima, a healer who helps the story's main character find his way in a coming-of-age story.

Bless Me, Ultima tells the story of Antonio Juan Márez y Luna, a six-year-old boy growing up in rural New Mexico during World War II. Antonio is befriended by Ultima, a kindly *curandera*, healer, who has come to stay with Antonio's family. Through Ultima, Antonio discovers the mysteries of the plains surrounding him and learns how to use its plants for medicinal purposes. But when Ultima heals Antonio's uncle from curses placed on him by a family of witches, Tenorio Tremem-tina, the witches' father, declares war against Ultima. Much of the drama of the novel grows from the conflict between Ultima and Tremem-tina, which plays out as a struggle between good and evil.

Another theme of the book is Antonio's struggle to understand his place in the world. Like Anaya's own history, the boy is pulled between his father's wandering life of a *vaquero* and his mother's harmonic, grounded existence with the earth itself. He also contemplates his future—as a priest, as his mother desires, or as a scholar, as Ultima predicts. And, he questions the validity of his Catholic faith that seems helpless against pain and suffering while Ultima's magic heals. His struggles are exemplified in his discovery of a golden carp in the river, which as told in local folklore is a god. To simply suppose the carp may share divinity with God becomes a question of meaning that feels to Antonio like a betrayal of his mother's faith, yet it is a question he cannot help but ask.

Although *Bless Me, Ultima* would receive wide acclaim upon its publication, Anaya faced serious struggles in finding a publisher who would accept his manuscript, which incorporated both English and Spanish words. Sending inquiries out to numerous publishers, he received back a rejection from all of them, most often because his writing was too Latino in style and language. "It was extremely hard," Anaya told *Publisher's Weekly*, "I sent the book to dozens of trade publishers over a couple of years and found no interest at all. The mainstream publishers weren't taking anything Chicano and we had nowhere to go. For us, living in a bilingual world, it was very normal to allow Spanish into a story written in English—it's a process that reflects our spoken language—but [in approaching mainstream publishers] I was always called on it. Without the small academic, ethnic, and university presses, we'd never have gotten our work published."

Finally, Anaya happened on an advertisement from Quinto Sol Publications, a small press in California, inviting authors to submit manuscripts. He sent in *Bless Me, Ultima* and Quinto Sol quickly agreed to publish it. *Bless Me, Ultima* became a reality in 1972, seven years after Anaya had first begun writing the novel. Critics responded enthusiastically to the book, noting that it provided a new, refreshing offering to Chicano literature, and it was awarded the Premio Quinto Sol Award for the best Chicano novel of 1972. The new author would find fame among Chicano readers and scholars.

With his new-found acclaim, Anaya secured a faculty position at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, where he remained as teacher and adviser until he retired in 1993. He published his second novel, *Heart of Aztlán*, in 1976. The novel tells the story of the Chavez family, who is forced to move from their family farm to the barrios of Albuquerque. *Heart of Aztlán* is a political novel that focuses on the struggles of a displaced family. While the father attempts to fight the oppressive forces that surround him, his children succumb to the temptations of sex, drugs, and alcohol, and the family is torn apart. Although it won the Before Columbus Foundation American Book award, *Heart of Aztlán* was not as well received as *Bless Me, Ultima*. *Tortuga*, Anaya's third novel, published in 1979, completed a loosely tied trilogy that focused on the Chicano experience over several generations. *Tortuga* is set in a sanitarium for terminally ill teenagers. The main character is a teenage boy who lies in the hospital in a full body cast, partially paralyzed and unable to move. He is nicknamed Tortuga, which means Turtle in Spanish, because of his cast. In despair, he tries to kill himself, but through the wisdom of another boy who is terminally ill, Tortuga learns to accept and appreciate his life. The book was well received and was considered by some critics to be Anaya's most complete and accomplished work.

Following the completion of *Tortuga*, Anaya branched out, experimenting with writing plays, short stories, poems, documentaries and travel journals, and children's stories. His short stories were collected as *The Silence of Llano*, 1982. *A Chicano in China*, 1986 was a nonfiction account of Anaya's travels to China. *The Legend of La Llorona* 1984 and *Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl*, 1987 were both retellings of traditional Mexican folk stories, and *The Farolitos of Christmas: A New Mexican Christmas Story*, 1985, was Anaya's first children's story. In 1985 he published an epic poem, *The Adventures of Juan Chicaspatas*. Anaya also served as an editor for numerous publications, as well as a translator and contributor to other Chicano works.

In 1992 Anaya published *Albuquerque* (the original spelling of the city's name), the first in a new series of linked novels. The second novel, the highly praised murder mystery *Zia Summer*, followed in 1995. *Rio Grande Fall* was released in 1996, and the final installment of the loosely linked quartet was *Shaman Winter*, published in 1999. *Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert*, published in 1996 was yet another departure in style for Anaya. The story, which employed allegory to tell a mythical story, was panned by critics, one of Anaya's few missteps during his thirty years of writing. In 2000 Anaya wrote another epic poem, this time aimed at middle and high school students. *Elegy on the Death of Cesar Chavez* celebrated the life and struggles of the famed Chicano labor leader. The dust jacket and author notes provided factual details, and the poem moved the reader between grief and hope of a rallying cry for action.

Following his retirement from teaching in 1993, Anaya has devoted his time to his writing and traveling. Like his mother before him, Anaya has remained tied to the land and in 2002 lived with his wife in Albuquerque, and like his father, he has satisfied his desire to wander by traveling extensively throughout South and Central America. Anaya, who spends several hours a day writing, told *Publisher's Weekly*, "What I've wanted to do is compose the Chicano worldview—the synthesis that shows our true mestizo identity—and clarify it for my community and myself. Writing for me is a way of knowledge, and what I find illuminates my life."

Selected Writings

Novels

Bless Me, Ultima, Quinto Sol, 1972.

Heart of Aztlán, Justa, 1976.

Tortuga, Justa, 1979.

The Legend of La Llorona, Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol, 1984.

A Chicano in China, University of New Mexico Press, 1986.

Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl, University of New Mexico Press, 1987.

Albuquerque, Warner Books, 1995.

Zia Summer, Warner Books, 1995.

Rio Grande Fall, Warner Books, 1996.

Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert, Warner Books, 1996.

Rio Grande Fall, Warner Books, 1996.

Shaman Winter, Warner Books, 1999.

Other

The Silence of Llano, Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol, 1982.

The Adventures of Juan Chicaspatas, Arte Publico Press, 1985.

The Farolitos of Christmas, Hyperion, 1995.

The Anaya Reader, Warner Books, 1995.

Farolitos for Abuelo, Hyperion, 1998.

Elegy on the Death of Cesar Chavez, Cinco Puntos Press, 2000.

Anaya's manuscript collection is located at Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

—Kari Bethel