

Anaya, Rudolfo - Essays on Anaya's work

# **CECIL ROBINSON**

**THE · INTERPLAY  
OF CULTURES IN  
THE · HISTORY &  
LITERATURE · OF  
THE BORDERLANDS**

6-25-92

DATE

Reference

DEPARTMENT

01 LANG: eng  
 02 SKIP: 0  
 03 LOCATION: zim  
 04 CAT DA: -  
 05 RCODE1: t  
 06 MAT TYPE: a  
 07 RCODE3: -  
 08 COUNTRY: azu

B16622855  
 Last updated: 05-11-92  
 Created: 05-11-92  
 Revision: 1

Cecil Robinson

# No Short Journeys

*The Interplay of Cultures in the History  
and Literature of the Borderlands*

With a Foreword by Robert S. Cauthorn and  
an Introduction by Reed Way Dasenbrock

The University of Arizona Press  
Tucson & London

---

A Creative Burst from New Mexico:  
*The Novels and Stories of Rudolfo Anaya*

It seems fitting that New Mexico, the state which has most preserved its Hispanic and indigenous past, should have produced a novelist who is steeped in the traditions and folklore of that past. This writer, Rudolfo Anaya, is not only heir to these traditions; he also has the personal ingenuity to invent some "traditions" of his own, assuming the license of the writer of fiction. Although Anaya grew up in New Mexico with its large Hispanic population, he has, nevertheless, experienced some prejudice against his race. It was the Chicano movement of the 1960s, which he encountered at just the right time in his development, that gave him an affirmation of his self-worth. He has written exultantly that "a feeling of renewed pride flowed in the people. Everywhere I went, the message was the same: It is good to be a Chicano!"

The novel which first brought Anaya to the attention of a large reading public was *Bless Me, Ultima*, a work of fiction which has both a freshness and an eerie quality that mark it as a singular contribution to Chicano literature. Published in 1972, *Bless Me, Ultima* is on one level an intimate account of life in a Mexican-American family in a small town in New Mexico. But on a deeper level, as in the case of the works of Hawthorne and Faulkner, Anaya's novel makes use of folk culture and folklore to symbolize universal themes, ultimately the clash of good and evil.

An earlier form of this essay appeared in *Puerto del Sol* 19 (Fall 1983): 125-133.

Place is used both realistically and symbolically in this novel, and certain places, with their special connotations, are played off against each other. In the town of Guadalupe there are the school, the church, and Rosie's whorehouse. In the nearby town of El Puerto there is Tenorio's saloon. These places serve as points of reference in the novel as well as contributing strongly to the atmosphere of the book.

The narrator is a young boy, Tony Márez, who is seven years old at the start of the novel and ten at the close. But the point of view is that of an adult mind recollecting the years of boyhood. At the beginning of the novel, Tony's parents bring an elderly woman, a *curandera*, to live with the family. A *curandera* is a traditional healer and dispenser of herbs. Such women were often feared as *brujas* (witches), and many people gave Ultima a wide berth. Tony's family owes Ultima a debt for cures and for midwifery. In fact, she helped bring Tony into the world. Tony and Ultima soon develop a strong affection for each other, and Tony becomes a kind of apprentice to the old woman, learning from her the secrets of nature and also much general wisdom.

The point is made that Ultima's lore and learning come, on the one hand, from the Spanish/Moorish past and, on the other, from the Indian heritage. For example, she apologizes to plants before picking them and teaches Tony to do likewise.

For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug she made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it from its home in the earth. "You that grow well here in the arroyo by the dampness of the river, we lift you to make good medicine," she intoned softly and I found myself repeating after her. Then I would carefully dig out the plant, taking care not to let the steel of the shovel touch the tender roots.<sup>1</sup>

The novel has its villain in the evil Tenorio Tramentina, who brings upon himself and his three daughters the curse of the *curandera* Ultima. The firm writing and sense of discrimination in this novel preserve it from lapsing into melodrama.

In the collection of short stories *The Silence of the Llano*, Anaya demonstrates, as he had already done in *Bless Me, Ultima*, that he is willing to move away from safe and proven ground. His imagination is endowed with an exploratory energy, and he is willing to take risks. Increasingly in the course of its development, Anaya's writing has represented an important fusion, one which is also to be found in other examples of Chicano writing. Early works by Mexican-American writers seemed to be clearly in the tradition of American literary realism. The influence of such

writers as Steinbeck and Hemingway was apparent. But with the appearance of . . . *and the Earth Did Not Part* by Tomás Rivera and *The Road To Tamazunchale* by Ron Arias, Chicano literature began to take new directions. There was a movement inward, displaying the subjective landscape. In conjunction with this, elements of fantasy came into play. Anaya has taken Chicano literature further in this direction. What appears to be in process is a vitalizing fusion of American literary realism with the so-called magical realism to be found in the works of such current Latin American writers as Juan Rulfo (Mexico), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), and the Argentine writers Julio Cortázar and Manuel Puig.

This subjectivism and the use of magical elements are both strongly evident in *Bless Me, Ultima*. That such literary effects are able to blend so successfully within a generally realistic treatment is due in large measure to the nature of the subject matter. Regional writing within a rural setting almost invariably entails the use of folkloric materials. As in the black magic rituals of Nigger Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, the lore and practices of the *curandera* Ultima are inherent in a regional folk tradition. Magical elements, therefore, are not superimposed but are of a piece with the regional elements being treated. To be sure, Anaya, having established his framework within regional expectations, is able to exercise the creative imagination by bringing in elements that apparently are quite of his own making. Such would seem to be the case with Ultima's owl, containing the essence of her soul, and with the magical golden carp.

The subjective cast of the novel is assured by having a first-person narrator. That the narrator is a young boy recounting his rites of passage puts *Ultima* squarely in the tradition of the American initiation novel and in direct line of descent from Mark Twain's masterpiece. But here again Rudolfo Anaya is able to work in something very much his own, departing from the straightforward realism of Huck Finn's narration. The dream sequences in which Antonio's friends who have died appear to him in nightmares are projections not to be expected in works of literary realism, and indeed they invite speculations quite out of the ordinary. For example, when these friends are departing from the nightmare, they cry out to him longingly: "We live when you dream, Tony, we live only in your dreams." But such apparitional effects are occasional and do not disturb the balance of the novel.

In Anaya's next novel, *Heart of Aztlán*, realistic and magical elements are again fused—but this time in a more difficult enterprise. The inevitability is no longer there. The realistic elements are familiar ones in