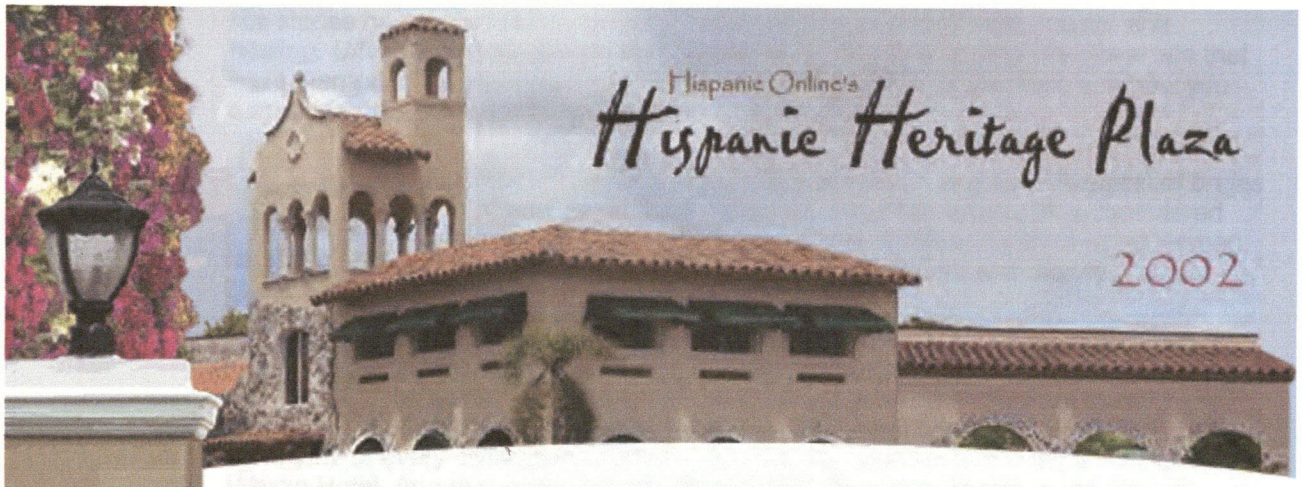


Contests
History & Heritage
Culture
Demographics
Education
Trivia
Calendar
Genealogy
Organizations
Hispanic Heritage Plaza 2001
Back to HispanicOnline

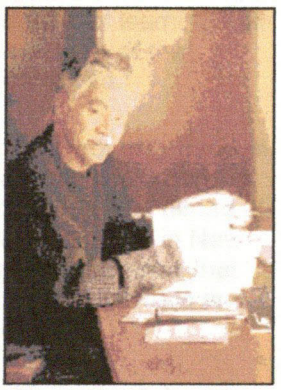
Culture
Books & Literature

A Passion for History
A conversation with Rudolfo Anaya

By MARTHA ESPINOZA
From HISPANIC Magazine

Although now retired from his former teaching job at the University of New Mexico, well-known Mexican American author Rudolfo Anaya still pursues his passions: writing and editing.

But over a bottle of Heineken and a glass of scotch, Anaya will tell you that "you can work at any kind of work in life, but I think it's [more] important to know one's history."

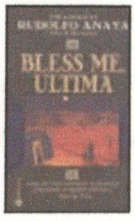


Anaya is near-legendary in Latino literary circles. The Mexican American has won many awards in his long career as a writer, including the New Mexico Governor's Literary Award, the Before Columbus American Book Award, the PEN-West Fiction Award, and the Excellence in Humanities Award. He was also one of the first Chicanos to win the Premio Quinto Sol for his bestseller *Bless Me, Ultima*, first published in 1972.

Speaking from behind a table in a makeshift hotel office in Chicago, Anaya says, "We not only have a social, economic, political history. We have a mythology. We have an oral tradition. We have *cuentos* [stories]." Going "back to those *cuentos* and back to the mythology" is a good way to understand the Mexican American heritage, he says. "As *mestizos*, we have to understand not only our European heritage, but also our Native American heritage. If you only understand part of yourself, you're incomplete."

Like many of his contemporaries—Tomás Rivera, Ana Castillo, Helena María Viramontes, and Sandra Cisneros—Anaya's literature strives to synthesize the dual role of being both Mexican and American. His characters are very much like himself and other Latinos living in the United States—they speak two languages, cope with two sets of customs, and balance two world views that are each unique and often opposing the other. "There's a balance you have to achieve," Anaya says. Anaya addresses many contemporary issues in his writing, but his style remains very mythic.

His stories have a certain idyllic quality, and are imbued with herbs, magic, and healing. *Ultima*'s central character is a *curandera*. "She is in a long line of healers that have learned ... how to understand the concept of the flight of the soul, and how you can reintegrate the soul. That's her healing power."



In this modern age, he says, many people have grown skeptical of *brujas* [witches] and *curanderas*. He notes that often witchcraft is considered fairytale convention, superstitious belief ritualized by third-world women, or a hobby for suburban kids with too much time and money.

"No, they're as real as this table," says Anaya, knocking three times on the wooden table. "Every culture develops medicine people or shamans," he says. "The history of witchcraft—or whatever you want to call it—is part of our inheritance. It's the idea of how we affect each other, and it is written into the myths of every civilization on earth." From a bay window on the eight floor of the Westin Hotel, Anaya surveys the city landscape. "The urban setting is too big," he says, gazing at the commotion of traffic and trains on Wabash Avenue.

Having grown up in the small village of Pastura in New Mexico, Anaya has always preferred the rural life over the urban. His life in New Mexico, in a Hispanic village, resulted not only in his strong sense of cultural identity, but also in his desire to remain part of a small and closely-knit community. "I think people are communal creatures," he says. "The urban setting is just an expansion of that community. In the beginning, villages were small, but [when they get too big], there's a point at which you lose your sense of community and you become alienated."

In urban centers that grow too big, "you no longer have control, you no longer have meaning, you no longer have a sense of community of people you trust," he says. "As *mexicanos* and Chicanos in this country," says Anaya, "we know we have a history, an oral tradition, a literature, and that our ancestors taught us the path that is fulfilling and productive for us. Sometimes, however, we have gotten lost, especially the young people that are too attracted by the material world and by, what I like to call, false cultures. They're in cultures that are not good for their souls, not good for their spirits, and in many ways not good for their bodies, because they give in to the violent ways of life. "The new generation has to be reminded of customs or traditions or learning that were very good to the prior generation, that have to be taken on in spite of the manifestation of change." Values, he says, "remain very much the same."

Anaya fights the encroaching alienation that threatens many youths, not only through his teaching and writing, but also with other projects. He visits universities and gives lectures, and recently he has been writing children's books and other works aimed at younger audiences. Besides his commitment to the Latino community, both in New Mexico and nationally, Anaya believes that his role is to "remind young people that they don't have to give in to the chaotic violence of life, to slap them in the face and wake them up, and say, 'You don't have to be caught up in that.' "

Young people must get personally involved in discovering what life is about, he says. "You have to find those pockets of humanity that resonate with your feelings and values, with your identity, with your need for fulfillment for growth."

Trying to find one's self is an important ongoing quest that transcends cultural boundaries. "You don't stop searching in your own community. From there you can go to other civilizations, other literatures, other histories and you begin to discover that, as human beings, we have a lot in common. The more you go back to understand origins of groups of people or civilizations, the more you understand yourself."

In the complex search for self-identity, it is necessary to incorporate the history, culture, and values passed down through the ages, but also to strike a balance with the

changes brought about by new eras, he says. "The communal traditions of one generation are changed by the next, and we have to accept it and learn how the changes happen, and what is good or bad about that change. Sometimes you have to break free of family and community to find a new level of awareness for yourself."

This article was first published in the September 1999 issue of HISPANIC Magazine.