

Intriguing New Mexico

by Wally Gordon

A review of *Rio Grande Fall* by Rudolfo Anaya, '63 BA, '68 MA, '72 MA
Warner Books, 359 pp

The real hero of Rudolfo Anaya's newest novel, *Rio Grande Fall*, is not the Hispanic private detective, Sonny Baca, who uses a cellular telephone and Aztec mysticism to solve a complex murder mystery.

Nor is Anaya's real subject how a Colombian drug cartel conspired—along with the FBI, the CIA, the DEA, an evil witch (who wants to steal a Ukrainian hydrogen bomb), and a surgeon experimenting with baboon heart transplants—to take over the Albuquerque balloon fiesta and flood the United States with cocaine.

Nor is it about how pre-Colombian animism can be manipulated to render the forces of good and evil equally invulnerable to destruction by each other.

While this novel of mystery and mysticism does indeed seem to be all of these things, it is really about New Mexico. The state is Anaya's true protagonist. Its glorious autumn is his setting. Its tales and traditions are the powerful river that flows beneath the melodrama. Its character and culture are the book's *raison d'être*.

Anaya, English professor emeritus at UNM and a UNM

alumnus, has long counted among the best known of New Mexico's handful of serious novelists. More than that, he has used his talent and fame as catalysts to spark the development of literature in this state, especially among the young and in the Hispanic community.

In *Rio Grande Fall*, Anaya has erected the conventional superstructure of a detective story on a more interesting foundation, that of the state he knows well and clearly loves profoundly. The customs of New Mexico, from roasting chile to driving lowriders, are a scent that wafts across every page.

Here, for example, is Anaya's description of a mass ascension at the balloon fiesta, which forms the backdrop to much of the story's action:

Pregnant with the hot-blue burning propane, the balloons rose suddenly into the open sky. Baskets swung free of tethered lines, carrying pilots and passengers upward. Excited crews left behind shouted hurrahs as the balloons rose, and the crowd of thousands

joined in the shout, a salute to flight. Shouts of joy, amazement and exclamation vibrated across the field, making the earth tremble. The echo swept across the dusty field and rose up and away with the balloons.

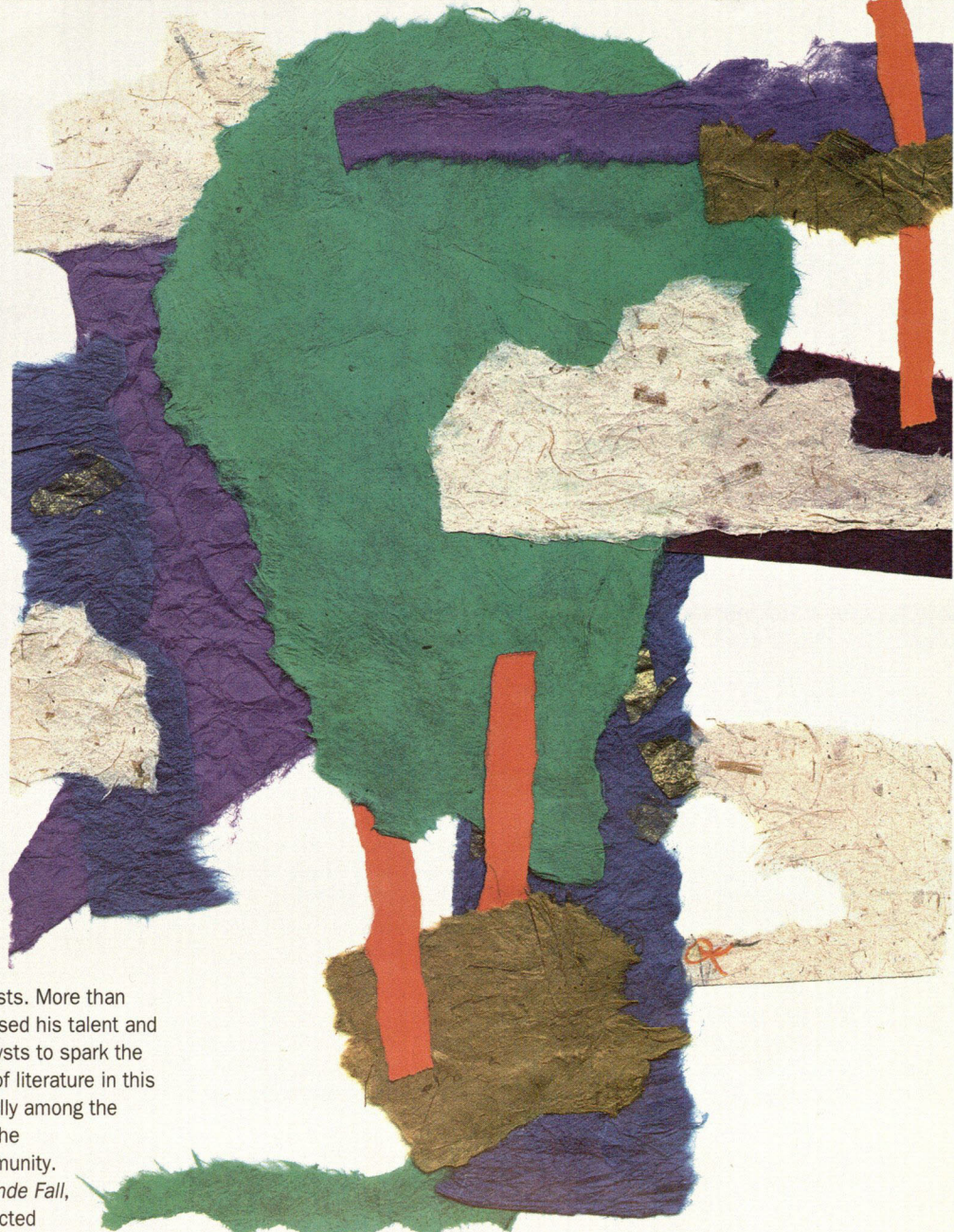
Often the unlikely catalog of *curanderas*, *brujas*, spies, thugs, and smugglers seems mere adornment, although of a peculiarly violent and vicious kind, for the real and beautiful story of Nuevo Mexico, the traditional land of Anaya's imagination, an almost Faulknerian country of historical complexity and vivacity:

In the northern Sangre de Cristos, the aspens were already gold, shimmering with light. Wood piles grew around houses

of the pueblos. In high forests the elk were mating, the bulls bugleing, and people were getting ready to go hunting. People were storing food, preserving jellies and jams, the sweets of harvest. The nights were cool now, not yet freezing but brisk, and the scent of piñon logs burning in fireplaces permeated the valley. It should be a time of peace, a time for home, a time of storytelling.

This is Rudolfo Anaya's real story. ■

Wally Gordon is editor and publisher of the statewide quarterly magazine, *New Frontiers*.



If I had an hour with basketball star Michael Jordan and we stood near a basket and ball, I might be tempted to suggest a game of one-on-one. I hope I wouldn't. The game would bore him and frustrate me.

For the same reasons, when—in the UNM physics and astronomy building—I had an hour with Nobel laureate Murray Gell-Mann, one of the lords of physics, I hoped I wouldn't suggest we discuss theories of subatomic particles. I would bore him, he would lose me.

I wanted to know why he teaches one course every other semester at UNM, and what he thought of the students and professors.

I knew this small man, white hair framing his face, body sometimes bent like a question mark, had helped discover, name, and put in order a revolution in modern physics.

The Subatomic Jungle

Discoveries by physicists in decades following World War II had blown apart the 1930s concept that atoms were built merely of electrons, protons, and neutrons. When scientists built accelerators — racetracks for subatomic particles — and crashed

sped-up electrons or protons into a variety of targets, they found unknown particles fleeing from the collision like so many clowns from a tiny circus car. Worse, the clowns changed identity as they ran, into other clowns or new ones. Sensors registered hundreds of never-before-seen packets of energy resulting from the collisions.

For physicists it was like arriving in Mexico City without speaking Spanish and trying to make sense of what was going on in stores without understanding the signs.

The public impression was that physicists had descended into arguing over the number of angels on the head of a pin, declaring existence of a new particle every time a bundle of energy didn't match previous discoveries.

There were baryons and mesons, neutrinos and muons, a gallery of creatures with fanciful names and—to the public—perhaps even more fanciful existences.

Gell-Mann helped restore order to this very real subatomic jungle. He suggested the term “strange” particles for particles born of violent collisions that decay slowly into other particles. He came up with the name and structure of the Eightfold Way (his, not Buddha's), that organized

these particles by characteristics that made their behavior predictable — a kind

of periodic table for subatomic particles.

He received the Nobel Prize in 1969 for his scheme to classify elementary particles.

Perhaps most spectacularly, he theorized that protons and neutrons were not basic units of matter but were made of components he called quarks—three quarks to a proton, and, in a different arrangement, three quarks to a neutron.

Using the concept of quarks, Gell-Mann could simplify the subatomic world considerably by showing that almost all experimentally discovered particles were merely predictable arrangements of the same smaller elements.

He also predicted that these quarks would never be seen by themselves in nature, leaving doubt whether quarks are merely mathematical constructs like Euclid's triangles or physical beings like horses or bricks. Later images from Stanford University's particle accelerator, which measured the deflection of electrons by proton targets, showed three distinct particles in each proton. Gell-Mann's mind had predicted reality.

In his most recent book, *The Quark and the Jaguar*, he describes the origin of the peculiar name, quark. First, he sought a word with a sound roughly similar to one he already intuited as appropriate. Then, reading a widely known, little-read work of fiction called *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, he came upon the line, “Three quarks for Muster Mark,” which may mean (among other meanings),

“Three quarts (of beer) for Mister Mark.” If true, it was reasonable to assume that the word quarks had the same vowel sound as quarts. The sound was very close to that

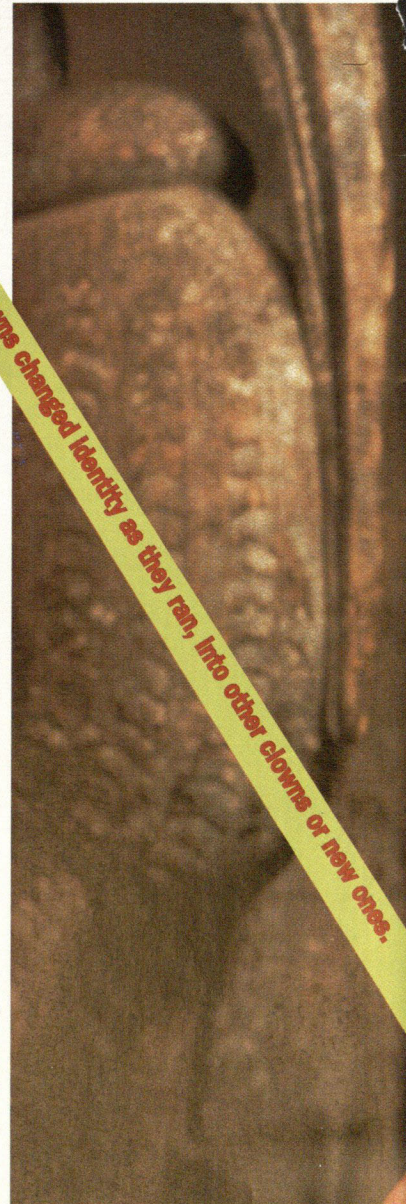


Photo by Murray Haynes.

which Gell-Mann had heard in his inner ear, and so the tiny beasts were named.

Scientists now have discovered six kinds of quarks — up, down, charmed, strange, top, and bottom. (The existence of the top quark—the heaviest of all—was confirmed by teams of hundreds of physicists last year at Fermi Laboratory near Chicago.)

When scientists built accelerators ... and crashed sped-up electrons or protons into a variety of targets, they found unknown particles fleeing from the collision like so many clowns from a tiny circus car. Worse, the clowns changed identity as they ran, into other clowns or new ones.

VF