

BUSH AND THE ECONOMY
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Newsweek

T H E A R T S

BOOKS

Poet of the Barrio

Struggling for power in the Southwest

Albuquerque. By Rudolfo Anaya. 280 pages. University of New Mexico. \$19.95.

Rudolfo Anaya may not be widely known outside Southwestern and Chicano literary circles. But with the publication of his critically acclaimed first novel, "Bless Me, Ultima," in 1972, the then 34-year-old writer from Albuquerque emerged as the most widely read Mexican-American. "Ultima" has sold more than 300,000 copies; his subsequent novels, "Tortuga" and "Heart of Aztlán," have become standard texts in Chicano-literature classes.

"Albuquerque," Anaya's first novel in more than 10 years (he's concentrated on nonfiction and short stories), is his best since "Ultima." It's a juicy tale about family, politics and a city where different cultures—Chicano, Anglo and Native American—jostle for power. The story centers on a young ex-Golden Gloves boxing champ, Abrán González. In the opening chapters, the fair-skinned Abrán is shocked by the revelation that his Chicano parents adopted him. Abrán learns he is *el güerito*—"the kid who had the gringa mother . . . a child of the line that separated white and brown."

Abrán meets his Anglo mother just as she's dying, but she won't reveal the identity of Abrán's father. The search for this man brings Abrán into contact with the city's power figures—from the beautiful mayor, Marisa Martínez, and her rivals Frank Dominic and Walter Johnson to Ben Chávez, the popular writer and professor (who bears a resemblance to Anaya himself). Abrán becomes caught up in a battle over Dominic's scheme to turn downtown Albuquerque into a desert Venice by re-channeling the waters of the Rio Grande.

The novel takes its title from a New Mexican legend. In 1880 an Anglo stationmaster couldn't pronounce the first *r* in the city's name. So he dropped the troublesome letter in painting the sign for the railroad stop, a move that for Anaya symbolizes the emasculation of the New Mexican way of life. Here, Anaya not only restores the city's original spelling; he offers us a



MICHAEL MOUCHETTE

A small-town boy discovers the big city: Anaya

glimpse of its divided soul. "The Anglos lived in the Heights, the Chicanos along the valley," he writes. "One didn't have to go to El Paso and cross to Juarez to understand the idea of border."

Anaya has had the idea for a novel about Albuquerque ever since he moved to the city, 40 years ago. "Coming from a small town in New Mexico, I was utterly fascinated by the big city," says Anaya, who was born in Pastura, N.M. "Its vitality, growth, architecture and its human landscape have constantly seeped into my blood."

But Anaya, who doubles as an English professor at the University of New Mexico and editor of the Southwest literary journal *Blue Mesa Review*, says the sun-belt boom in the 1970s has brought tremendous changes to the region and its traditional cultures. "I couldn't help but reflect on what this kind of growth means for . . . the soul of the people," he says.

Anaya, along with authors like Cristina Garcia, Victor Villaseñor and Sandra Cisneros, is part of a growing body of talented writers who are taking their places with African- and Asian-Americans in what is better called not the new multicultural writing, but the new American writing.

SUSAN MILLER