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Book World

Parable for Our Times

'Jalamanta' Is More Spiritual Search Than Story

JALAMANTA
A Message From the Desert

By Rudolfo Anaya
Warner, 194 pp. \$17.95

By Victor Perera

Toward the conclusion of "Bless Me, Ultima," Rudolfo Anaya's beguiling first novel of growing up in the old cattle-ranching traditions of New Mexico's *llano*, or prairie, the precocious narrator, Antonio Marez, sees evil forces at work in the violent deaths of his adult friends. His spiritual guide and confidante, the wise *curandera* Ultima, is killed when Antonio is helpless to stop a vengeful cowhand from shooting the owl that serves as her guardian spirit. Roused from a nightmare in which he becomes the crucified Christ, Antonio, who is being groomed for the priesthood, asks his father if a new religion can be made. "Why, I suppose so," his father replies, reluctant to admit to his son that the old beliefs of the *llano* were dying. Antonio concludes, "If the old religion could no longer answer the questions of the children then perhaps it is time to change it."

In "Jalamanta," an engaging tale that is more parable than novel, Anaya returns to the mystical themes of his early writings. Antonio's spiritual twin, Amado, wanders into the southern desert in search of the Holy Grail and reappears three decades later to enlighten his former neighbors in the decaying "seventh city of the fifth sun." The *Quinto Sol* of Aztec mythology is setting at the close of the millennium, and the sixth sun is yet to dawn. Into this dream landscape the exiled wanderer strides like a resurrected Quetzalcoatl, bearing a new wisdom culled from the world's religions.

Renamed Jalamanta (Veil Puller), Amado is welcomed by Fatimah, the love of his youth, who never wavered in her devotion even after the son she bore him in his absence was abducted by the Central Authority—the same evildoers, who banished Amado for preaching heresy. Far from eclipsing his conviction that man can become God, Amado's dark night of the soul in the desert has infused him with a renewed vision of man's godlike potential. A wise old healing woman, Memoria, helped him piece together the shattered

fragments of his faith into a syncretic religion of Universal Love.

"Jalamanta" covers ground familiar to Anaya's readers, but it does not have much of a story. The prophet's lifting of the veils that conceal the truths of the soul may make for refreshing homiletics, but it packs about as much dramatic suspense as Dante's "Paradiso." The homegrown magic realism of Anaya's "Bless Me, Ultima" and of his recent—and admirable—novel, "Alburquerque," gives way here to the didactic tone and format of Gibran's "The Prophet" or "The Celestine Prophecy." In place of the Hispanic American "Siddhartha" that one might expect from a storyteller of Anaya's proven gifts, "Jalamanta" approximates—and not by happenstance, if one goes by the book jacket—the teachings of Castaneda's Don Juan. The pantheism espoused by Jalamanta, like that taught by Castaneda's semi-fictional *curandera* from Mexico's Sonoran desert, is an eclectic mix of New World shamanism and Judeo-Christian, Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu Vedic and other Eastern traditions.

We are in deep need of simple truths, of rediscovering our ancient teachings, and "Jalamanta" may provide that opportunity for the half-million readers who have bought "Bless Me, Ultima." But "Ultima" has a dramatic narrative and fully fleshed characters in the boy Antonio and in the old *curandera* who exercised a formative influence on the fictional Antonio and on his creator.

As our bedeviled century lumbers to its conclusion, the millenarian urgency in Anaya's literary conceit underscores how far we have strayed from our religious traditions. "Jalamanta" suggests that our apocalyptic age is not prepared for its savior but may be ready to welcome the messenger.

The reviewer teaches journalism at the graduate school of the University of California at Berkeley; he is the author of "Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy."

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