

Rudolfo Anaya: New Mexican Writer of Historical Fiction

Gordene MacKenzie, Los Ranchos Historical Society

Among the writings of New Mexico award winning writer Rudolfo Anaya is a fictional account of a village he calls “Los Ranchitos,” which closely resembles Los Ranchos. Anaya, the author of *Bless Me Ultima*, is considered “the father of Chicano literature.” He described himself as an uncomfortable student in the late 50’s at UNM who saw few like himself and did not see himself or his culture represented in the literature he loved. Rudy stayed up late at night pounding the keys of his old Smith Corona typewriter, teaching himself to tell stories through the Chicano experience.

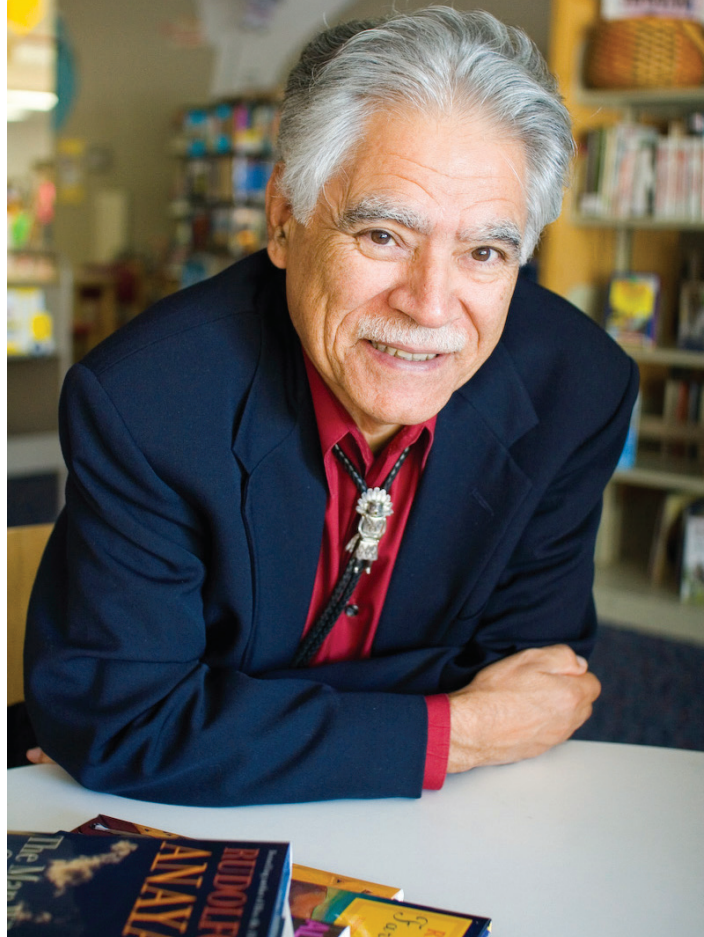
The first three novels he wrote he destroyed. By day he taught in the public schools. When working on a draft of a novel, the character of Ultima, dressed in black, appeared to him and told him to include her in his work. He did. Ultima, Rudy said, “was inspired by his wife (Patricia Lawless) who read seven drafts of his semi-autobiographical novel and shared her suggestions.” She became his trusted editor.

Bless me Ultima was rejected by the major publishing houses he sent it to. Reasons for rejecting it included his use of some Spanish words in the novel. After two years of rejections Rudy saw an ad in a publication and sent the manuscript to Quinto Sol, a small press in Berkley, who published it in 1972 and

awarded *Bless me Ultima* “the best Chicano novel of the year.”

In 2016, Obama presented Rudolfo the National Humanities Medal “for celebrating the Chicano experience and revealing universal truths about the human condition.” *Bless me Ultima*, his most popular book, was made into a film, a play, and an opera.

Rudolfo Anaya Statue in Santa Rosa, NM



Rudolfo Anaya at UNM in 2006

Bless me Ultima “is written in the first person because I identify with Antonio,” he said. Combining historical fiction with magical realism, the story is set in the rural plains of New Mexico (Pastura and Santa Rosa) where he was born and grew up in the late 1930’s through the late 1940’s. His main character Antonio grows up poor, amid a rich Mexican, Spanish, and Indigenous culture. His father is a vaquero (cowboy) who works cattle. His mother is a farmer who works the earth. Antonio’s life changes when Ultima, a curandera (healer) moves in with his family to remove a curse placed on his uncle by a witch. “She took my hand, and I felt the power of a whirlwind sweep around me...I saw for the first time the wild beauty of our hills and the magic of the green river... My soul grew under her careful guidance.” Young Antonio begins to question some of the traditional beliefs he grew up with.

Bless Me Ultima was censored in some states, including New Mexico, where, in 1981, the school board in Bloomfield burned copies of his book. Based on the huge international success of his novel, Rudy began teaching at UNM in 1974. I was privileged to be a student in his Chicano literature and a fiction writing class.

Bless me Ultima was followed by two more semi-autobiographical books, completing a trilogy. *Heart of Atzlan* (1976), set in the barrio of Barelitas in Albuquerque where Rudy moved in with his family in 1951, is about Chicano empowerment as the father in the story has an awakening and organizes railroad workers. *Tortuga* (1979) draws upon Rudy’s physical challenge of being paralyzed after diving into an acequia and hitting the bottom. He spent months in a full body cast with only a hole to expose his face. He turned

inward and “began to enjoy reading as never before.”

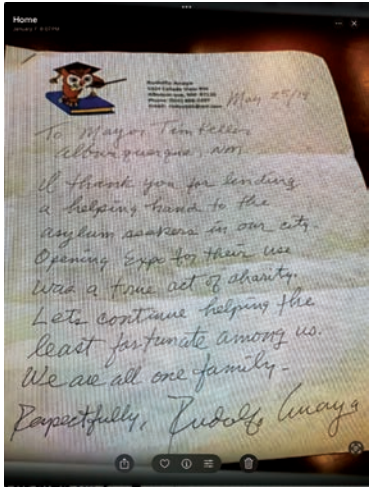
From 1995 to 2005, Rudy wrote a quartet of detective mysteries arranged by the seasons and centered around the character of Sonny Baca. Some of these novels are set in the fictional semi-rural Village of “Los Ranchitos” that mirrors Los Ranchos with acequias, cottonwood trees, adobe houses, and remains of ancient pueblo people found when digging a pool.

A visionary storyteller, Rudy’s writing reaches deep into the collective consciousness that unites us all. He wrote over 44 books, including novels, short stories, poetry, children’s books, and plays. His fictional books include historical accounts of the pueblos and Spanish contact, Los Alamos and the

bomb, struggles against over development, and social and economic struggles to better the lives of Mexican Americans. All of his novels include characters who are healers and/or spiritual guides.

Rudy was a progressive voice for civil and human rights, an advocate for education, the earth, water rights, and immigration. He

warned of dictators who rule by fear, “closing not only physical borders but forums where ideas are debated.” Shortly before he passed in 2020, he wrote a handwritten note to Mayor Keller that said, “Let’s continue helping the least fortunate among us.”



LOS RANCHOS HISTORICAL SOCIETY UPDATE

UPCOMING EVENTS
Please join us for a talk by members of the Los Ranchos Historical Society:
Saturday, March 15, 1:00-3:30 pm
Rudolfo Anaya Library
7704 2nd Street NW

“In the End We Are All Just Stories:” The Magic of New Mexican Writer Rudolfo Anaya.

The library will be celebrating the renaming (Rudolfo Anaya Library) Anniversary. Join us all for cake and an Anaya story time for kids.

MORE INFORMATION
About Rudolfo Anaya at the Rudolfo Anaya Digital Archive
<https://anaya.unm.edu/index.php/node/18>
About the Los Ranchos Historical Society
www.LosRanchosHistoricalSociety.org

CITY VIEW DENTAL STUDIO

Visit Us!

Enjoy dental care for the entire family at City View Dental Studio.
4830 Juan Tabo Blvd. NE, Ste. K,
Albuquerque, NM 87111

Request An Appointment Online
Or Give Us A Call: (505)
293-7611



- Routine Care for Adults & Children
- Teeth Whitening & Veneers
- Dental Implants
- Sleep Apnea & TMJ Treatment
- Anti-Aging Treatments + more!

CITYVIEWDENTALSTUDIO.COM

