

Rudolfo Anaya:

Dream Catcher of *Llano* and *Barrio*, Storyteller to the World



OWEN WISTER AWARD

Named after Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian* and considered the “father” of the Western story, the Owen Wister Award is presented to a living author for lifetime achievement in Western history and literature. The recipient is automatically inducted into the

Western Writers Hall of Fame, which is housed outside the McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.

By Nancy Plain

WWA recognizes Rudolfo Anaya for the luminous beauty and soul of his writing, which not only immerses the reader in Mexican-American life, but, through the author’s profound compassion for all people, transcends geography and ethnicity to embrace the universal.

Born in New Mexico in 1937, Anaya is the highly acclaimed author of many novels, as well as short story and poetry collections, stage plays, essays, a travel journal and children’s books.

Among his numerous literary awards are the PEN-West Fiction Award; the American Book Award; the New Mexico Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts; the National Medal of Arts Lifetime Honor; and the National Humanities Medal, which was presented by President Barack Obama at a White House ceremony in 2016.

In his acceptance of the Wister Award, Anaya writes, “Thank you, WWA, for this award. My ancestors came to the Southwest in 1598. I have been writing their story to honor

them and their struggle in this land that was not so romantic then, and is still harsh and beautiful. Those ancestors fill my imagination and dreams.

“I also want to thank Win Blevins for not only making me aware of WWA, but for being my sponsor. In order to survive in the West we have had to be good neighbors and help each other. In Spanish we say we are *vecinos*. Now I have many *vecinos* at WWA. God bless.”

The fifth of seven children, Anaya grew up in the small town of Santa Rosa, on the Pecos River. His father was a cowboy, and his mother came from a family of farmers, so the tension between those who love to wander and those who are anchored to the land is a theme that would later find its way into Anaya’s novels.

After World War II, the family moved to Albuquerque. Anaya, 15, had to adapt to an urban lifestyle that was radically different from the small-town intimacy of his childhood. After high school, he enrolled at the University of New Mexico.

He had fallen “in love with literature” early in life and pursued this love in college. But because he could not find any books that reflected his own Mexican-American reality, he began to write his own. In the 1960s, Anaya taught in the Albuquerque public schools and married Patricia Lawless, who encouraged him as he taught himself to write.

“Books are salvation, you know?” he says. “Books are the mirror in which we see ourselves.” He labored through seven drafts of his first book.

The result was *Bless Me, Ultima*, published in 1972 and perhaps Anaya’s most famous work. At the time of its writing, though, the novel was so far from the literary mainstream that the author had trouble finding a publisher. But he persisted (“writers are strong-willed”) and finally found acceptance at Quinto Sol, a small press in Berkeley, California. *Ultima* went on to win the Premio Quinto Sol Literary Prize for the best Chicano novel of the year – and to launch a career. The book also established Anaya as one of the foremost founders of the Chicano, or Hispanic, literary movement, a movement that has played a critical role in deepening the nation’s understanding of the Mexican-American people – their past and present, their social and political struggles, the richness of their culture.

Anaya’s prose is often sensual and haunting. This, from the novel *Zia Summer*: “Ranches were isolated in the wide open spaces of the raw landscape, and people just saw things. The canopy of the Milky Way at night was brilliant and immense, and it was etched with falling stars. Coyotes cried, and the large and barren landscape of the state became a ghostly moonscape. Loneliness filled the nights.”

To read this writer is to enter into the ancient world of the Southwest and to fall under a kind of spell in which dreams and wonder are never far from the surface of the everyday.

President Barack Obama and Rudolfo Anaya after the 2016 presentation of the National Humanities Medal at the White House. Courtesy Barack Obama Presidential Library



A conversation with Rudolfo Anaya

By Nancy Plain

As this article went to press, the opera adaptation of *Bless Me, Ultima* was in full swing, playing in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to stellar reviews and sold-out audiences. At the same time, the prolific Rudolfo Anaya learned that his latest novel, *ChupaCabra Meets Billy the Kid*, the third in the ChupaCabra series, will be published in August.

Anaya took the time to share his thoughts and insights.

Mr. Anaya, first I have to ask you: Did I see a dachshund in your 2012 National Endowment for the Humanities interview? Does your dog keep you company when you write?

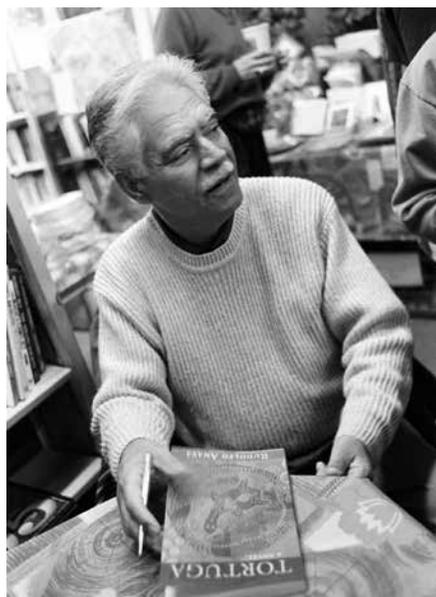


Belle. Belinda Henry

We have always had dachshunds, a line of beautiful friends dating back 50 years. The one you saw is Oso, my faithful friend and caregiver, always with me. He loves to write stories.

You have written, “I have trained myself to act as a dream catcher. I don’t seek characters; they seem to come to me asking me to tell their stories.” Can you describe that moment when *Ultima* came to you?

I was writing *Bless Me, Ultima*, always at night because I taught school during the day. One night *Ultima* appeared at the door and asked what I was doing. “I’m writing a story about growing up.” She said, “You will never get it right until you put me in it.” Thus, she became the soul of the story.



Growing up in Santa Rosa, did you know a *curandera*, or healer, like *Ultima*?

Once my mother got sick and nothing was helping. My father brought a *curandera* to treat her. She got well. Those days there were many stories about witches. Partly to scare us kids, also that’s the way the folklore went. But those women who helped people were real. With prayers and the power in the soul they “cast out demons.” If you have faith you get well. Faith in God and saints.

***Bless Me, Ultima* has been adapted for stage and film and had its sold-out debut this year as a full-length opera. Did you have any say in the production?**

I worked a little with the composer in the beginning, talking about details. That’s it. It’s his work.

You’ve spoken about the “magic of words.” What was it like growing up in the oral tradition, when stories were all around you?

Everyone was a storyteller, every related event was “story” to my ears. I dreamed story. Everything in nature was a story. A rainbow made me scream in joy (I was alone at the time). The river was full of creatures. *La Llorona* (the Crying Woman), El Coco (*Cucui*, in Spanish). Once I was chased by *La Llorona*, but got home to safety. Home was safe.

What were your favorite childhood books?

I read the Hardy boys, Nancy Drew, cowboy stories, went to the movies and listened carefully to story, but most of my creative imagination was nurtured by the oral tradition. All stories inspire, I am full of inspiration. I weave stories all day long ... and into the night.

How did you make the leap from being a voracious reader to becoming a writer of such extraordinary power?

Rudolfo Anaya at a book signing. Miguel Gandert

When did you first realize that you could write?

I loved writing at elementary school, loved to write book reports and illustrate them. I wrote two novels when I was at the [University of New Mexico] and wrote poetry. Once I wrote a Shakespearean sonnet for a young girl (woman). I loved the Romantic poets and [Walt] Whitman.

Who are the writers who have influenced you most?

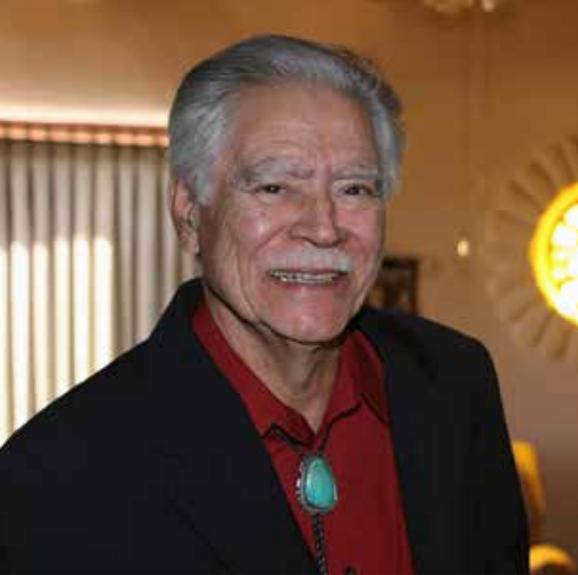
There are too many to pick. I read voraciously when I was at the University of New Mexico. My wife and I read every evening. Our house is full of books. They’re naming a library here in Albuquerque after me. Maybe I can give it the books.

In your work, your love of the Southwest comes through so strongly. In *Bless Me, Ultima*, you write that *Ultima* unfolded for Antonio the beauty of the *llano*. What does the land mean to you?

I was born in a small village on the eastern *llano* (plains country) of New Mexico. The people and the land got into me, made me who I am. I spent my childhood playing at the Pecos River, learning, listening to water, trees, animals, etc. Much of this was through osmosis. Place is a character for me, much larger than my two-footed characters, beautiful and sometimes terrifying. I am in awe of nature, from the Big Bang to all the interesting creatures that have evolved here. All is conscious, alive.

When we speak of Spirit of the Place, that home place that infuses us with energy, and for writers the genius to create, in Spanish we call this place *querencia*. We really mean the Spirits of the Place, plural. Little playful goblins, or elves, or green men, let’s just say “spirits.” The mournful sound of river cottonwoods, the spirit is there, the call of a bird, the bird that comes to sit near us, something moving in the garden, these are the *duendes*. At least that’s one way for me to understand why nature all around me is always moving, alive, breathing, revealing. How can we help but write to give it

CONVERSATION (continued on page 12)



Rudolfo Anaya Belinda Henry

Speaking about Anaya

“The work of Hall of Fame writers represents the diversity of the West, and Rudolfo Anaya is a stunning example of that. With passion and clarity he has delivered prose that formed and leads the way in the area of Chicano literature. He stands shoulder-to-shoulder with other great Southwest authors, leaving a legacy that will inspire readers and writers for generations to come.”

– Candy Moulton,
WWA executive director

“Rudolfo Anaya can rightly lay claim to having invented a whole genre of Southwestern literature and is justly regarded by an entire generation of

Hispanic and Latino writers as their literary inspiration. From the seminal *Bless Me, Ultima*, with its delicate, difficult mix of magical realism and hard-edged observation, to his contemporary Sonny Baca detective novels, Anaya brings to readers an incisive, unromanticized look at a Latin American culture too often marginalized by traditional Western writing.”

– Kirk Ellis, WWA president

“K.I.S.S. is a tongue-in-cheek rule for writers. It stands for ‘Keep It Simple, Stupid,’ and Rudolfo Anaya’s writing is an excellent example. His choice of words achieves emotional depth and spiritual clarity. He depicts



for readers to come away with a deeper understanding of the ways in which we all are alike.”

– Lucia St. Clair Robson,
2016 Wister Award recipient

“The Western has never been about gunfights and horsemanship, but people in conflict: with one another, with the elements, with themselves, which is the true stuff of literature. Because there

the cultural and religious conflicts that are specific to his New Mexican background, yet are, at the same time, universal. He makes it possible



are so many misconceptions about our form’s intentions, I celebrate whenever an artist who has proven himself in the high court of American culture is honored as

one of us. Rudolfo Anaya’s graceful and powerful prose, the strength of his characters, and his vision have entitled him to all the awards our profession has to give. It benefits us all that he has been selected to receive the WWA’s Wister Award for lifetime achievement. Congratulations to Mr. Anaya. Congratulations to us all.”

– Loren D. Estleman,
2012 Wister Award recipient

“I treasure Anaya’s books. Defying our cynical culture, he risks a language ripe with emotion and shouts his love for human beings and their struggles, and for the magic and miracle that surround us. His sails are full of feeling. Beyond the classic *Bless Me, Ultima*, my favorite is *The Old Man’s Love*



Story. It tells of an elderly man’s relationship with his dead wife. Still sensing her presence, he lives in their love. It is a deeply moving tale. Next I love *The Sorrows of Young Alfonso*, and”

– Win Blevins,
2015 Wister Award recipient

CONVERSATION (from page 11)

voice? This I felt especially when I was a kid. A sunset swallowed me up, the spirits chased me, for they can be happy or nasty creatures. The nasty ones make novels not succeed, the voice is not true. *Duende* takes us to the ecstatic moment, the next second drops us. I have always honored these spirits.

In your novel *Zia Summer*, one of the characters experiences the sunrise as prayer. Nature is a sacred presence in your work.

Sunrise is special. I learned a simple prayer from an Indian woman. “Grandfather, a song I am sending, a song I am sending. Come the earth,

warm the two-footed and the four-footed, warm the children, bring the rain clouds....” You can add more to the blessing. I also pray to God for the new day I have been granted.

Your novels, especially *Tortuga*, strike a chord with people who have known despair. But you also give your characters hope and the strength to endure.

In 1954 I dove into a water ditch, hurt my neck, and was paralyzed for a few weeks. I spent time with other injured kids and some of the old polio cases. A new me (man) had to be born out of that experience.

You taught English at the University of New Mexico for years. Is there one most important thing you would tell aspiring writers?

Write, write, write.

The old question: if you could meet anyone from the past, who would it be?

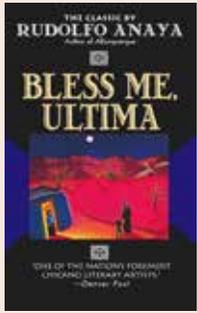
My grandfather.

Did you know?

Rudolfo Anaya Elementary School opened in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 2009. The school’s mascot is the Jackalope, taken from Anaya’s book *Juan and the Jackalope*.

Reading Rudolfo Anaya

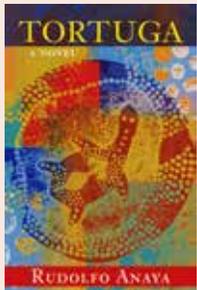
Bless Me, Ultima



Growing up in a small town in New Mexico, young Antonio wonders whether to follow the traditions of his mother's family of church-going farmers or those of his father's boisterous clan of *vaqueros*. Set in the years after World War II, Antonio's close-knit community is unraveling under the pressures of the economy and the majority Anglo culture. He finds guidance from Ultima, a revered *curandera*, who comes to stay. "When she came, the beauty of the *llano* unfolded before my eyes.... The magical time of childhood stood still...."

Told in incantatory prose, this novel is a tale of a boy's adventures, a journey through myth and legend and an exploration of universal questions. Amid the uncertainties, Ultima shows Antonio how to summon the strength to endure.

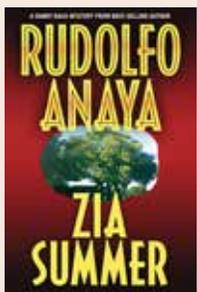
Tortuga



After Anaya was injured in a diving accident as a teenager, he underwent a grueling rehabilitation in order to learn to walk again. The children's hospital where this took place became his only world, an "underworld" that he had to struggle to leave. In this powerful novel – part autobiography, part dream-image and myth – Anaya merges his own experience with that of the main character, a boy who calls himself "Tortuga." Tortuga and other injured patients ask the eternal question: "Why me?" As time passes, Tortuga realizes that all people are crippled in some way. For Anaya, writing this book

was a personal journey. It is also a deep gaze into the human condition.

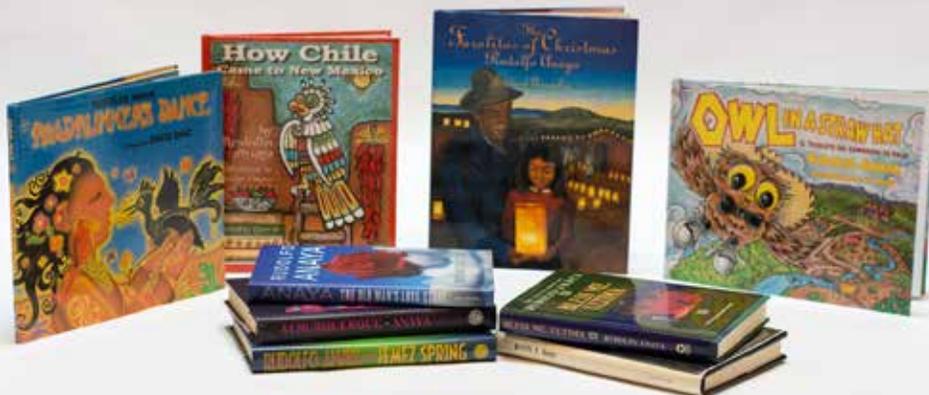
Zia Summer



This is the first of four murder mysteries featuring Chicano private investigator Sonny Baca, a self-described "handsome devil." When his cousin Gloria is murdered in what appears to be a ritual killing, Baca is thrown into a maelstrom of grief and vows to avenge her death. But *Zia Summer* is more than a murder mystery. Here, too, Anaya gives us the complexity of New Mexican life, where Indian, Hispanic and Anglo cultures blend or collide; where modernity threatens to smother the old ways; and where environmentalists lock horns with the nuclear industry of Los Alamos. Intertwined with the

fast-paced plot are interludes of exquisite prose and the wisdom of the spirits of the ancestors.

– Nancy Plain



Nicole Bridges

