THE GODFATHER

BY *CARMELLA PADILLA*

Forty-five years ago, when he introduced a *curandera* named Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya set off a literary eruption. The lauded author reflects—and looks ahead to new stories and new adventures

An owl played a symbolic role in Rudolfo Anaya's groundbreaking work of magical realism, *Bless Me, Ultima*. *Right:* The author today in his Albuquerque home.

BILL GORUM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; STEVEN ST. JOHN

***A**ND WITH ULTIMA came the owl . . .*

On a starry night in September 2016, I am camping near the New Mexico–Colorado state line and reading *Bless Me, Ultima* in the shadowy light of a kerosene lamp. I am preparing for an interview with Rudolfo Anaya, the New Mexican author who wrote the groundbreaking novel, published in 1972. Before falling asleep, I read about Ultima's owl:

Its soft hooting was like a song, and as it grew rhythmic it calmed the moonlit hills and lulled us to sleep. Its song seemed to say that it had come to watch over us.

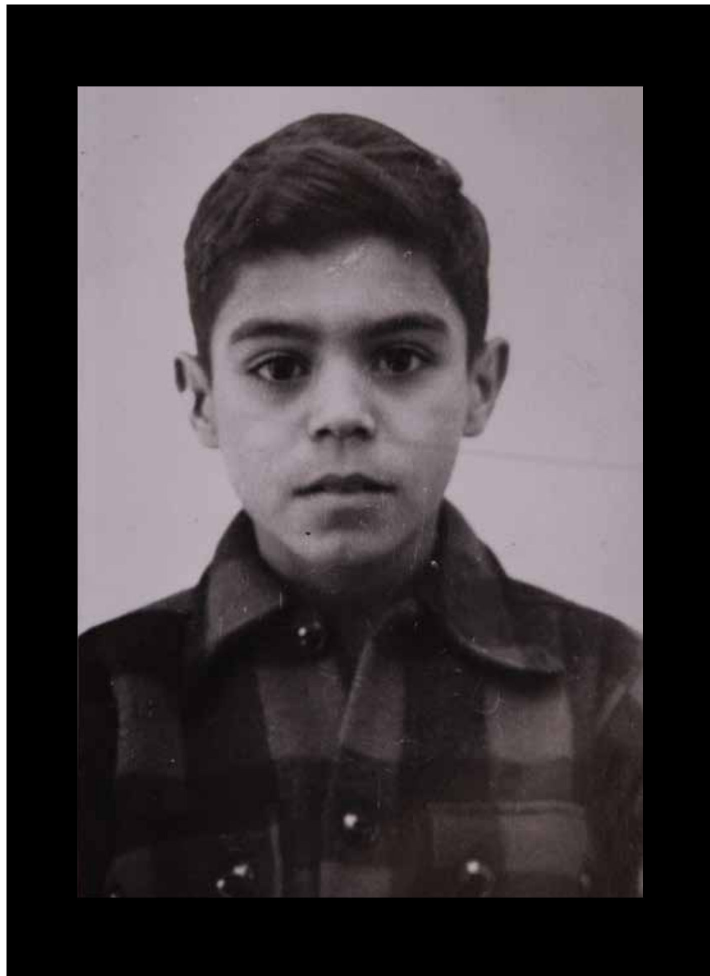
The next morning, my husband asks if I heard the owl outside our tent, hooting quietly in the night. I wonder if, as Anaya wrote, *the owl had always been there.*

The majestic figure of an owl sits on a post above the backyard garden of Anaya's northwest Albuquerque home. The bird faces east toward the distant Sandía Mountains, looking, one imagines, to the *llano* beyond, the spacious plains of east central New Mexico where Anaya was born.

While the owl's practical task is warding off garden pests, it reminds me of the soft-hooting, wide-winged owl that swoops through *Bless Me, Ultima* with an air of power and mystery. *The owl was the protective spirit of Ultima, the spirit of the night and the moon, the spirit of the llano!* wrote Anaya, establishing the sense of place, language, mood, and imagery that propelled him to international acclaim as the "godfather of Chicano literature."

With *Bless Me, Ultima,* Anaya wrote New Mexico into literary history. In the book, the owl, the elderly *curandera* (healer) Ultima, and six-year-old Antonio Márez y Luna converge in 1940s-era Las Pasturas, a small village suspended in a fragile space between Ultima's otherworldly wisdom and Antonio's real-world experience. Through them, and the countless characters in Anaya's subsequent works of fiction and nonfiction, children's books, poetry, and essays, the author illuminated what it means for him to be a New Mexican.

"The heart of New Mexico is, for me, the people, *la gente—los compadres, las comadres, los tíos, las tías, los vecinos,*" Anaya says on this autumn afternoon. "It's the connection and the understanding between my Indo-Hispano cultures. If people don't make that connection, they don't understand New Mexico."



In 2017, Anaya marks 45 years since the publication of *Bless Me, Ultima.* During that time, he has made an indelible impact as a writer, educator, and cultural icon. Now 79, he has received countless honors for his storytelling and literary activism, including, this past September, the prestigious National Humanities Medal. In a White House ceremony, President Barack Obama commended Anaya for works that "celebrate the Chicano experience and reveal universal truths about the human condition," and as a teacher who "spread a love of literature to new generations." After issuing a fist-raising shout of *"¡Viva Obama!"* Anaya characteristically shifted the accolades back to his beloved childhood home, saying, "Tell Santa Rosa this is for them."

Even as Anaya's oeuvre draws the world's attention, his focus remains on his New Mexican *gente*. His passion for preserving his culture and his ongoing pursuit of his craft consistently open new doors of expression—a novel set on the *llano, The Sorrows of Young Alfonso,* was released last year; a new children's book is in progress; and preparations are under way in Albuquerque for the 2018 world premiere of an opera based on *Bless Me, Ultima,* a collaboration between Opera Southwest, the National Hispanic Cultural Center, and the California-based Opera Cultura.

"The artist has to continue to challenge himself,"

Anaya in his Santa Rosa youth and, later, in his Albuquerque backyard.

COURTESY ANAYA FAMILY (2)

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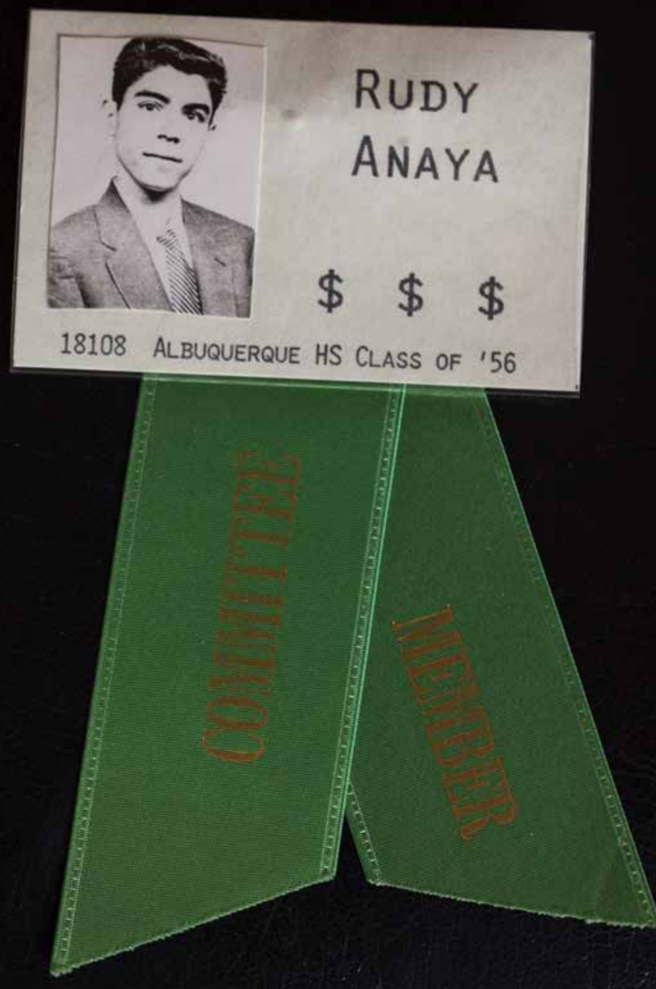
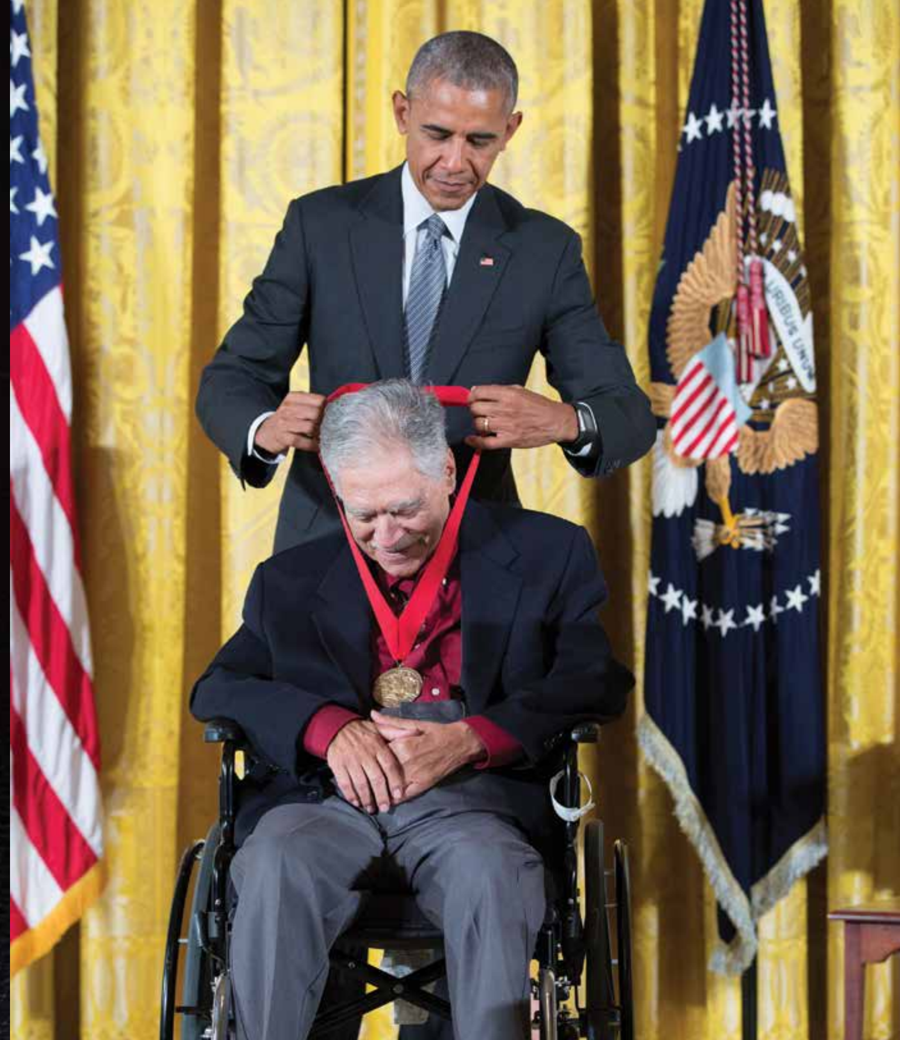




From left: **A souvenir from Anaya's Albuquerque High School days, class of 1956. Anaya receiving the National Humanities Medal from President Obama last September.**

COURTESY ANAYA FAMILY, OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

he says, "to always go deeper and deeper and ask, 'What is human nature like?'"

Anaya's desire to transform experience into art, and his persistence in a mainstream publishing industry that once rejected his bilingual expression and Chicano vision, paved the way for generations of New Mexican writers. Perhaps most notable is the literary *luchadora* Denise Chávez of Las Cruces, an American Book Award–winning writer.

"For me, a young woman growing up in the desert of southern New Mexico, *Bless Me, Ultima* was a beacon of hope and gave me respite from the lack of seeing my own kin come to life in art and words. I thought to myself maybe someday, too, I could become a writer," Chávez says. "When I did meet Mr. Anaya and he became my mentor and teacher, I was challenged further when he asked me, point-blank and without fanfare: 'So what are you going to do? Become a writer or what?'"

I first met Anaya in the pages of *Bless Me, Ultima* in the seventh grade. I met him a second time as a student in his creative writing class at the University of New Mexico (a class that, for a reason I can't remember and now regret, I dropped). A lifetime later, I meet him again in the spacious home on a verdant corner lot where he and his wife, Patricia, rooted themselves in 1976. The two designed the house with detail and imagination that reflected their special bond as teachers, writers, and readers. Everywhere, there are books. The room they conceived to read in is round.

"My wife and I said, 'This room will be a room to read and be quiet and love in,'" he says. "If a problem comes up, it will go round and round and round. It won't have a corner to stay in."

Anaya is charming, down-to-earth, handsome, humorous. He is comfortably dressed, a telling sign of a writer used to spending many hours at a desk. Patricia died in 2010 after 44 years of marriage, but, he declares, "We're still here together." I listen to the master storyteller speak as if he were writing, watch the light of imagination flicker in his eyes. Naturally, he weaves anecdote and experience into a narrative of his own life and that of his characters.

"One reason that I wrote *Bless Me, Ultima* was because, to me, the people I grew up with were so beautiful, I didn't want them to disappear. I knew a book could be timeless. I knew the characters could be preserved."

Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya was born on the threshold of World War II, in the vast, windswept cradle of Guadalupe County. He was delivered by a local *curandera* in the village of Pastura, the eighth of ten children whose first language was Spanish. His mother's people were farmers, his father from a generations-long family of *vaqueros* (cowboys) who drove cattle and sheep. On the hardscrabble *llano,* few would have predicted Anaya's famous future. But if one believed in destiny, as did his mother, Rafaelita Máres Anaya, the child was fated to write.

"I was crawling, and my mother put a few items in a circle and put me in the middle," Anaya says. Years later, she told him, "You went to the paper and the pencil." She may have simply been giving him toys to play with, but more likely, he says, "she put those things there to divine. She knew things that the world around her didn't know."

Anaya was raised in nearby Santa Rosa according to the old ways—in a culture steeped in nature, Catholicism, hard work, and the *cuentos* (folk tales) of a centuries-old oral tradition. "My parents, uncles, aunts, they always talked about what they were doing, where they were working, what happened that day. Sooner or later, they'd be telling a story from the old days," he recalls. "We were very poor, but proud of the hard work that provided what we had."

In 1951, when Anaya was 14, his father, Martin, moved the family to the Albuquerque barrio of Barelas, joining one of Anaya's older brothers who had left Santa Rosa after the war. There, Anaya encountered tragedy and opportunity.

At 16, he dived into an acequia and hit bottom. "I went into instant paralysis," he says. "I couldn't move, couldn't save myself. My friend had to pull me out." A spinal cord injury sent Anaya to Carrie Tingley Hospital in the town of Hot Springs (now Truth or Consequences). Doctors bound him in a body cast that stretched from the top of his head to below his waist. A hole in the plaster shell exposed his face. Rather than watch the world he could no longer maneuver, he looked within.

"I was encased, kept a lot to myself," he says of his two-month hospitalization. "With that solitude, I began to enjoy reading as never before. Literature was giving me a lifeline."

Eventually, Anaya walked again, though it took years to fully regain his strength and movement in his neck. He came home, graduated from Albuquerque High School, and in 1958 enrolled as an English literature student at UNM. With few Hispano peers or professors, he again kept company with books. Inspired by the works of Shakespeare, American writers Walt Whitman and Thomas Wolfe, and the 18th- and 19th-century Romantics, he began writing seriously.

"Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains," Anaya says with a dramatic flourish and a chuckle, quoting the French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "That's the kind of poetry we wrote."

Neither of Anaya's parents received schooling beyond second grade, but his mother, especially, supported his educational direction. "My mother understood that what I was doing was very important. She made sure I had a place, a little desk and a typewriter and a light. She would tell her *vecinos* [neighbors], her *comadres* [friends], *'Estas escribiendo.'* He is writing."

Soon, Anaya had produced volumes—poetry, short stories, and other budding works. Then, one life-changing night in 1963, he lit the fireplace and threw the pages of his latest romantic novel into the flame. He knew he had something more meaningful to say.

"By the time I got to the story of Ultima, I had settled down and begun to look at my own sense of place," he says. "I asked myself, 'What is there?' The people, *la gente,* the stories they tell. We believed in the oral tradition. It was alive."

The tradition merged myth with reality. "There were stories about *brujas* [witches]. People knew them, they talked to them, they said, 'Be careful,'" he says. There were stories about the owls that lived along the river bosque. "Often the witch turns into an owl to travel."

From this intersection of land and lore, Anaya created a character—an aged *curandera* (or was she a *bruja*?) whose way of being and seeing personified the solitude and struggle of the *llano.* He imagined her faithful companions—a boy who looked up to her and an owl who watched over her. He shaped a storyline highlighting themes of family, faith, nature, good and

"Ultima has kept transforming herself. If the characters I write about are worthy of being made into other forms of art, I have to let them live for future generations."

evil, and, of course, destiny.

He called her Ultima, literally "the last one." She was an old soul in a time and place long past. She led him back to the beginning and into the future:

She took my hand, and the silent, magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun-baked llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun's home. My bare feet felt the throbbing earth and my body trembled with excitement. Time stood still, and it shared with me all that had been, and all that was to come.

The back cover of my 1972 edition of *Bless Me, Ultima* quotes Anaya as the recipient of the Premio Quinto Sol national award for Chicano literature: "Writing is not easy. It is a lonely and oftentimes unappreciated endeavor. But I had to keep creating. I had to keep trying to organize all the beautiful, chaotic things into some pattern."

It had been a long road from inspiration to bestseller. After seven years of writing and rewriting, Anaya's manuscript had no traction among mainstream publishers. His mix of English and Spanish confounded editors, though it accurately depicted the bilingualism of *nuevomexicanos*. But the Premio Quinto Sol changed everything. Independent publisher Quinto Sol released the book and gave Anaya a $1,000 prize. The book's national exposure coincided with the Chicano cultural and civil rights movement, placing him at its vanguard. He began receiving invitations to colleges and universities in California, the early hub of the movement, to read and sign. "That's when the world opened up for me," he says.

Anaya's introduction to Chicano politics was profound. It expanded his knowledge of New Mexico's intertwined history with Mexico, whose flag flew over the state from 1821 to 1846. It inspired his identification with his Indo-Hispano heritage, that unique merging of indigenous Mexican, Spanish, and Native American bloodlines that constitutes many modern-day New Mexicans' DNA. It also opened the door to Aztlán, the mythical point of origin of the Aztec peoples, an area believed to have once encompassed the southwestern United States. Chicanos adopted Aztlán as an ideological and geographical space to be reclaimed.

"When I was writing *Bless Me, Ultima,* it was all about *nuevomexicano* culture," he says. "But I have always been interested in mythology and legends. It wasn't until the Chicano movement that I began to read about the Aztec world and the lost connections between Mexico, Aztlán, and the United States."

Chicano politics heightened Anaya's awareness of the plight of the *campesinos,* the farmworkers and other laborers who, then and now, struggled for civic equality and social justice. "The Chicano movement was a universe of ideas, a universe of 'Let's get things done,'" he says. "We were going back to a different kind of past. We realized we have the right to this place. We have a right to education."

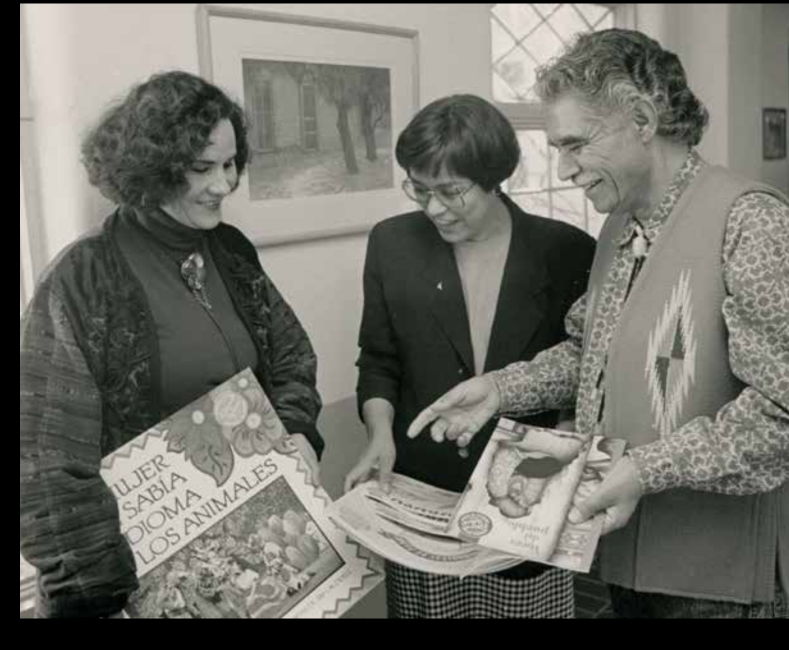
Anaya was not without his critics. "There was one small group of Chicanos in California that thought *Bless Me, Ultima* wasn't socially relevant. They thought all literature should be Marxist," he says. In a 1973 review in this magazine, author Fray Angélico Chávez, also a native New Mexican, quibbled over the book's witchcraft theme as "not a true picture of Hispanic New Mexicans in general" and wondered whether Anaya has "a Mexican mental background rather than a New Mexican one."

Nonetheless, Anaya remained firmly committed to the movement, to writing, and to the promise of education. After earning bachelor's and master's degrees at UNM, he began a 29-year teaching career. The first decade took him from Harrison Junior High, in the South Valley, to Valley High School to the since closed University of Albuquerque. When *Bless Me, Ultima*'s success prompted an invitation to teach at UNM, he stayed for 19 years. Even with the day jobs, he says, "I was writing at night, writing all the time."

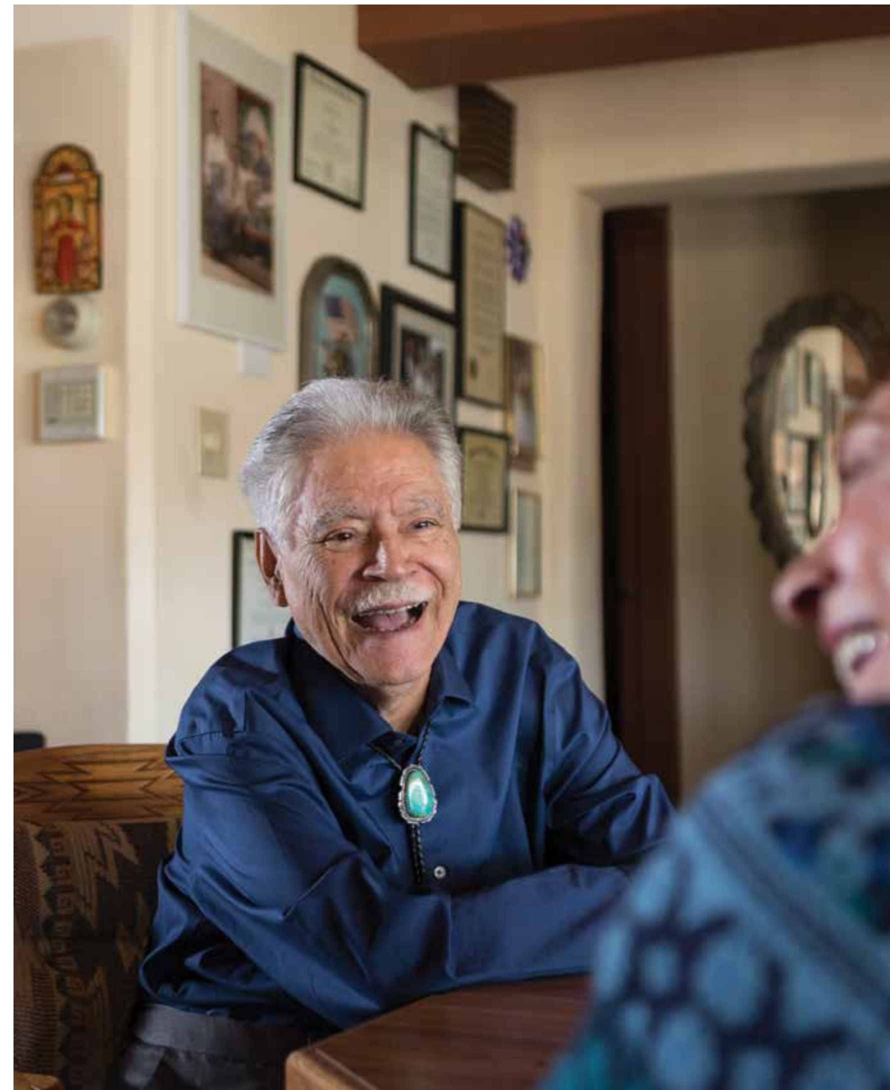
In *Heart of Aztlán*, *Tortuga*, *The Silence of the Llano*, and other early works, Anaya honed his brand of magical realism and autobiography. *A Chicano in China*, a 1986 travel journal, launched his exploration of non–New Mexican subjects and themes. In 1987, *The Farolitos of Christmas* became the first of his many New Mexico–based children's books. Between 1995 and 2015, he took on the mystery genre in four books featuring Albuquerque private eye Sonny Baca. And in the 2013 novel *The Old Man's Love Story*, he confronted his grief over Patricia's death with poetic pathos and profound love.

Bless Me, Ultima has now sold nearly two million copies in English and more than 80,000 in Spanish in the United States alone; has been translated into Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish, and French; and is on reading lists in schools nationwide. The book was adapted for a feature film in 2013. Next year comes Mexican American composer Hector Armienta's opera.

As "an epic story of universal truths," Armienta says, *Bless Me, Ultima* is a natural for local and global operagoers. Anaya is working closely with Armienta to develop his characters for the stage, while funds are being raised to take the production beyond Albuquerque.



New Mexico State University professor Rosalinda Barrera (*center*) talks with Denise Chávez and Rudolfo Anaya about their children's books in the early 1990s. *Below:* Anaya at home with his sister Edwina Garcia.



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"There are transformations in our lives," Anaya says. "The same is true of artworks. Ultima has kept transforming herself. If the characters I write about are worthy of being made into other forms of art, I have to let them live for future generations."

If Anaya has one wish for future New Mexicans, it is for them to read. One of his latest children's books, inspired by the Rudolfo Anaya Summer Reading Program in Río Arriba County, features an owl from Española. The bird spends so much time playing with Raven and Crow that none of them learn to read. The book, to be published by the Museum of New Mexico Press in fall 2017, follows the trio to Wisdom School and tracks their adventures in literacy.

"I'm so interested in the children reading about the cultures here, but also worldwide, learning through novels about New Mexico or China or India or Brazil," he says. "Very often we don't have the money to take a trip, but we can visit so many places through reading."

After guiding generations of readers across New Mexico's *llano* and beyond, "the godfather" has become the elder. Age hasn't dimmed Anaya's desire to preserve his people's special ways and place; it has added wisdom and insight to his stories. It has also carried the profound sorrow of losing his spouse and caused debilitating arthritis in his back. Still, he is heeding the lessons of Ultima: *She taught me to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time.*

"There's pain and sadness, and it affects my life, but I'm the most grateful man in the world," he says. "I still have my home and my family and I'm still writing. I pray every night, and I thank my *abuelitos* for their hard work. I'm grateful for the struggles that brought me here."

The afternoon wanes, and Anaya and I close the book on our conversation. Later, I realize that his greatest legacy is teaching us that words and books are life. Places changes, people are transformed, but stories endure.

Anaya confirms this a few weeks later when I talk to him again. He tells me he is thinking about writing a new poem.

"The pear tree in the yard has been changing color," he says. "If you pay close attention, you see that the story is more than just the tree. Each leaf has a history. How many stories are there?" ■

Carmella Padilla is featured in "Storytellers," p. 8.