

# 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.”



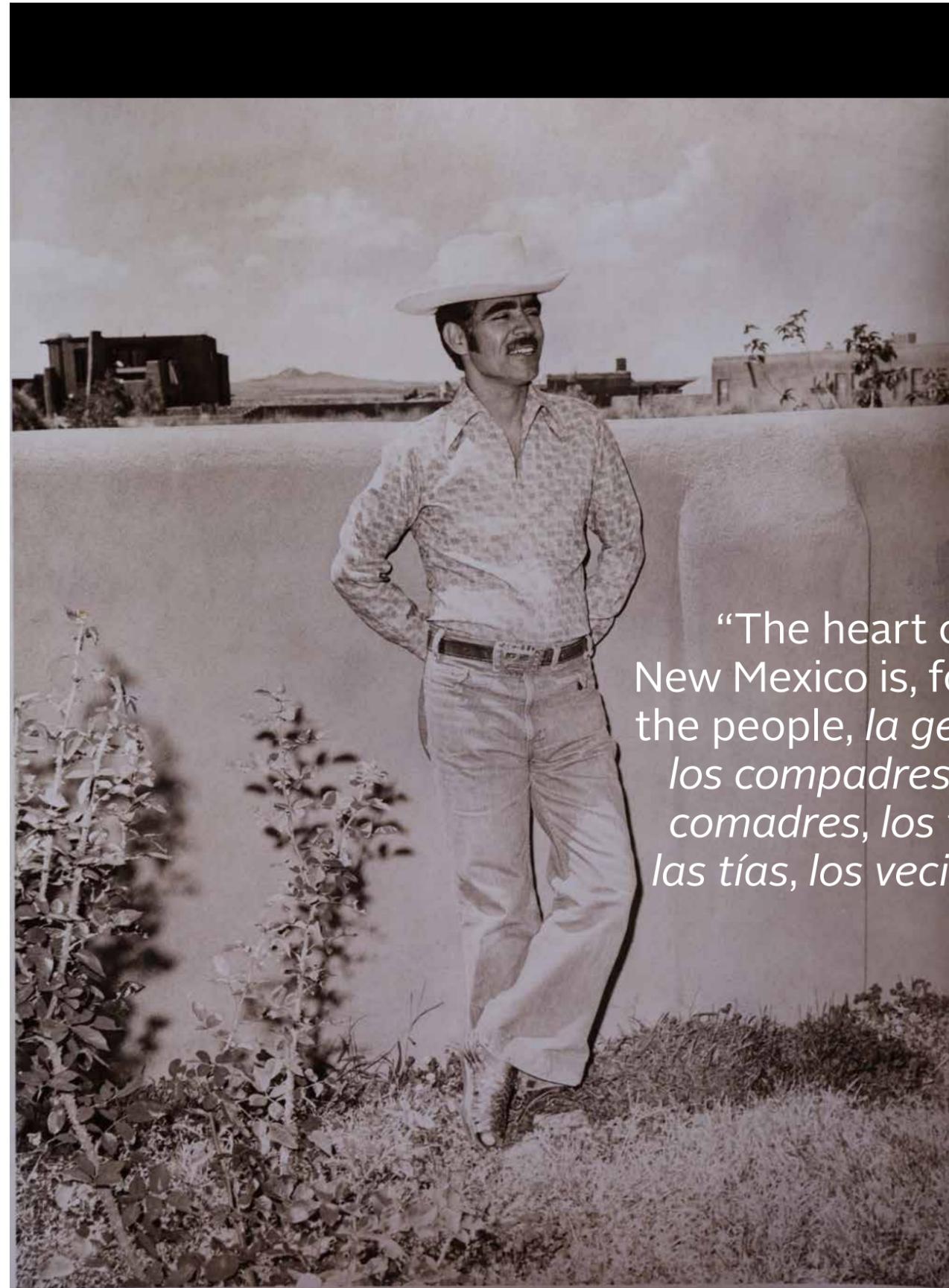
In 2017, Anaya marks 45 years since the publication of *Bless Me, Ultima*. During that time, he has made an indelible impact as a writer, educator, and cultural icon. Now 79, he has received countless honors for his storytelling and literary activism, including, this past September, the prestigious National 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.

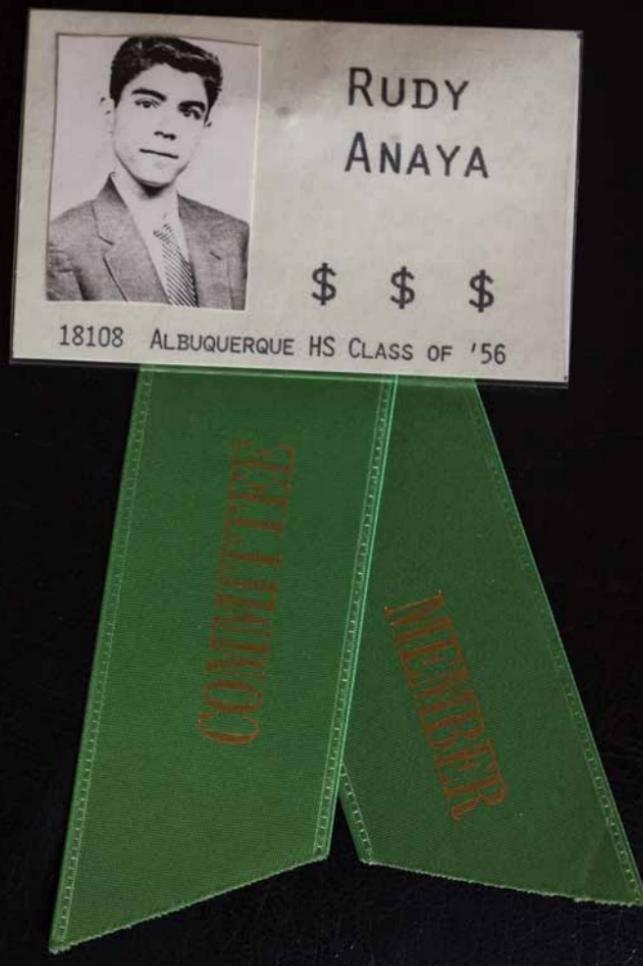
“The artist has to continue to challenge himself,”

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

COURTESY ANAYA FAMILY (2)



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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.”

**R**udolfo 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

**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

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 Barelás, 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 best-seller. 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



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.



beyond Albuquerque.

“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 change, 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.



Author and artist  
N. Scott Momaday  
at his home in Santa Fe,  
May 2017.

# GREAT SCOTT

After earning fame in the 1960s as the nation's preeminent Native American fiction writer, N. Scott Momaday kindles the stories of his ancestral peoples, revealing who they—and he—are today.

BY *CARMELLA PADILLA*

PORTRAITS BY *STEVEN ST. JOHN*

**N** SCOTT MOMADAY is laughing. With a deep, resonant, throw-your-head-back belly laugh, his pleasure fills the roundness of his face and the rectangular space of his southeast Santa Fe living room. He is telling the story of a story. “And so I tell my students, ‘I remember being on the Bering Land Bridge 20,000 years ago in the last Ice Age. It was cold. God, it was cold.’”

He laughs again, lets the humor linger, then settles back into his more serious self. “I say that to emphasize the importance of cultural memory, of racial memory. *I remember it. I imagine it. Imagine that.*” »

It is an unseasonably warm afternoon in spring, and Momaday, master of memory and imagining, is sitting comfortably within the art-filled walls of the home he has occupied for the past three years. It is just the latest place that Momaday, now 83, has anchored his pen in a lifetime of living and writing in New Mexico, a landscape that inspires in him a profound sense of belonging. “I have spent most of my life in New Mexico,” he says. “I have been out of state for some lengthy periods, but I always think of this as home.”

Indeed, Momaday is proudly and unpretentiously in his element here as a storyteller, artist, and educator of international renown—a poet and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, as well as a playwright, essayist, professor, painter, photographer, and more. Surrounded by paintings and prints by such notable Indian artists as Fritz Scholder, his late father, Alfred Momaday, and others, plus archival photographs of his Kiowa forebears, he reveals himself as a connoisseur of art and history. More readily, he reveals his roots in the Kiowa oral tradition, an art and history largely unwritten until Momaday took up the task. He is a virtuoso of the spoken word, accepting a visitor’s questions as invitations to exploration—of language, identity, and, ultimately, story. “Ah,” he says often, “there’s a story in that.”

Momaday’s sonorous voice, for which he is fittingly famous, alternates with authority and awe of his subjects, engaging his listener with dramatic inflection and tone. He is charismatic, funny, graceful, gregarious, polite. Even while seated, his presence is powerful.

That voice first echoed across America in 1969, when, at 35, he won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his 1968 novel, *House Made of Dawn*. Of Kiowa and Cherokee descent, he was the first Native American to win the prize. His story of Abel, the broken World War II veteran who returns home to the ancient pueblo of Walatowa in search of healing, gained Momaday overnight acclaim for prose that, a *New York Times* reviewer wrote, was “as subtly wrought as a piece of Navajo silverware.” At a time of widespread civil unrest in the United States, the book offered valuable cultural and social insights into the struggle of Native peoples to exist in both the Native and non-Native worlds. Momaday was declared the premier Native writer of the 20th century.

Some five decades later, many of Momaday’s 12 books—including poetry collections, essay anthologies, novels, memoirs, travel literature, and children’s stories—have been translated into French, German, Italian, Russian, Swedish, Japanese, and Spanish. His teaching, speaking, research, and activism have taken him from Santa Fe to Siberia. His plays have been per-

formed at the Kennedy Center and beyond, his paintings and drawings exhibited internationally. He has received the 2007 National Medal of Arts; the Unesco Artist for Peace Award; the Premio Letterario Internazionale “Mondello,” Italy’s highest award for literature; and countless other national and international distinctions. And he is widely credited as the pioneering force in the so-called Native American Renaissance of Indian writers, scholars, artists, and political activists who followed his course.

In 2018, Momaday will mark the 50th anniversary of *House Made of Dawn*’s publication. Also in the works are two documentary films slated for PBS. *Return to Rainy Mountain* is directed and produced by Jill Momaday, an actress, a writer, and one of the author’s four daughters. It follows her and her father on an intimate journey of connection along the sacred 18th-century Kiowa migratory route, which the elder Momaday tracked in preparation for writing his best-selling book *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Complementing that is an *American Masters* feature, *N. Scott Momaday: Words from a Bear*, by Kiowa director Jeffrey Palmer, who first met Momaday as a 10-year-old at a ceremony of the Kiowa Gourd Clan. His father, Gus Palmer Jr., a Kiowa writer and linguist, has been friends with Momaday for decades.

“I was walking along with Dad, and this rather large figure came toward us,” Palmer recalls. “I remember he shook my hand, and his hand was gigantic. He was definitely a bear of a man. His voice was so pronounced, even more deep and heavy and large at that time.”

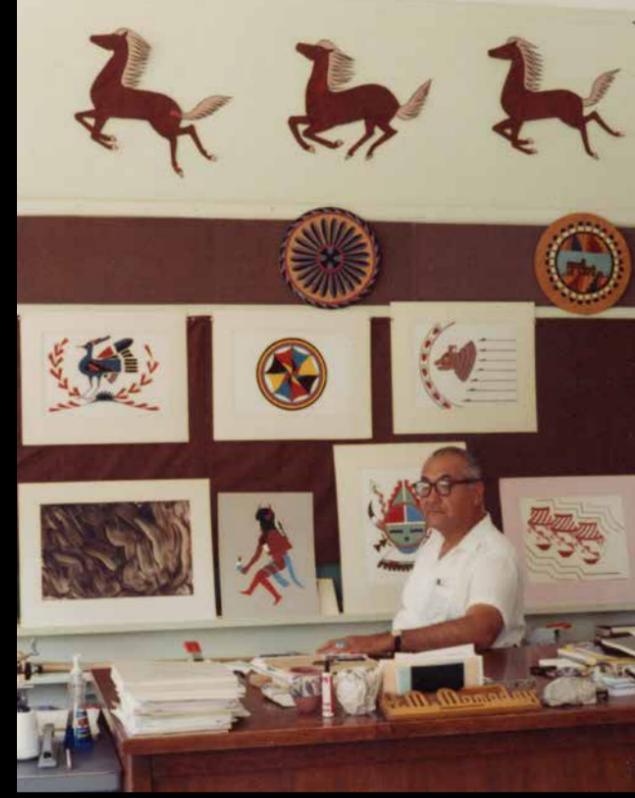
Palmer’s film charts the trajectory and impact of Momaday’s life and art both inside and outside the world of the Kiowa, an Oklahoma tribe of some 10,000 people with ancestral roots on the Great Plains. With its rich history of art and oral tradition, Momaday looms large in Kiowa culture.

“He’s a big deal, a treasure, a gem,” Palmer says, “for Native people especially, but for all Americans. He has used the power of literature, of storytelling, to bring consciousness to what it means to be indigenous in the United States.”

In his 1976 memoir, *The Names*, Momaday wrote, *The telling of the story is a cumulative process, a chain of becoming, at last of being.* His own story is seeded deep in the fertile language and lore of the Kiowa storytellers who came before:

*The bear came to kill them, but they were just beyond its reach. It reared against the tree and scored the bark all around with its claws. The seven sisters were borne into the sky, and they became the stars of the Big Dipper.*

In the summer of 1934, six-month-old Navarro Scott Momaday traveled with his parents to Devils



Facing page, clockwise from top left: Kiowan landmark Devils Tower, in Wyoming. Al Momaday, Scott’s father, teaching at the Jemez Day School. The red clay of Jemez Pueblo, where Momaday moved when he was 12. His mother, Natachee, at the day school.

TOM GRUNDY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES 039068; NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES 039069



Above his desk, Momaday displays photos of family members, including (from left) paternal grandfather Mammadety, parents Natachee and Alfred Momaday, and paternal grandmother Aho.

Tower in the Black Hills of Wyoming. Rising 1,200 feet into the sky, the great black monolith that the Kiowa call Tsoai (Rock Tree) is believed to have grown out of the tree stump where the sisters fled when their brother became a bear.

Not long after, back in Oklahoma, the storyteller Pohd-lohk (Old Wolf) came to the arbor of the family home on Rainy Mountain Creek, which the infant child's paternal grandfather, Mammadety (Walking Above), had built in 1913. Pohd-lohk lifted the boy, son of Huan-toa (War Lance), and his wife, Natachee (Indian Moon), skyward. *He spoke of how it was that everything began, of Tsoai, and of the stars falling or holding fast in strange patterns on the sky. And in this, at last, Pohd-lohk affirmed the whole life of the child in a name, saying: Now, you are Tsoai-talee—Rock-Tree Boy—forever fixing the child in the embrace of his people's ancestral landscape.*

As a son of the Kwuda ("coming out") people—the name this tribe of noted storytellers call themselves—Momaday's future indeed seemed preordained. *Even then, he wrote later, language bore all the names of my being.* Still today, he says, "I identify with that boy."

He was raised near Mountain View, in the area of Rainy Mountain, along the abundant waters of its descendant creek, both prominent landmarks for the Kiowas on the southern plains. In the early 1700s, the nomadic tribe had left the northern headwaters of

Montana's Yellowstone River, traveling east to the Black Hills of South Dakota and into the high plains, finally settling in the Wichita Mountains of southwestern Oklahoma. For over 100 years, they roamed the southern plains, gaining stature as fierce hunters, warriors, and horse people, tending great herds of buffalo in a culture steeped in mythology and the spirit of the Sun Dance religion. But in the mid-1800s, the U.S. Cavalry bound their free-ranging ways, restricting them to individual homesteads. While the Kiowa and their allies, the Comanche, were the only two Plains tribes not removed to reservations, the Kiowa culture was quashed. The buffalo were slaughtered, the Sun Dance rituals banned. The only thing left was the story.

"When I was very little, my father told me stories," says Momaday. "He knew a good many Kiowa tales. They made a great impression on me. I kept them in my mind."

Huan-toa, commonly called Alfred, spoke fluent Kiowa, but Momaday was raised speaking English, the language of his mother's Virginia and Kentucky lineage. Natachee Scott was raised a proper Southern belle, but in the late 1920s, she placed a feather in her hair, wrapped a blanket around her core, and claimed the Cherokee heritage of the great-great-grandmother for whom she was named. Soon after, Natachee married Alfred, who had changed his surname, Mammadety, to Momaday.

Alfred was a watercolorist in the tradition of the early-20th-century Kiowa Five, known for developing Native American easel painting with boldly graphic depictions of Kiowa ceremony and dance. Natachee wrote poetry and juvenile fiction, most notably the 1965 *Owl in the Cedar Tree*. "I grew up in a very creative household, and I think that determined my life in many ways," Momaday says. Both were also teachers, and as they embarked on a life together, they sought space for their only son to learn and create.

**T**here is a great red mesa, and in the folds of the earth at its base there is a canyon, the dark red walls of which are sheer and shadow-stained; they rise vertically to a remarkable height. You don't suspect that the canyon is there, but you turn a corner and the walls contain you; you look into a corridor of geologic time.

Time and space shifted again for Momaday in autumn 1946, when he came to live at Walatowa—Jemez Pueblo. Momaday's birth, in the midst of the Great Depression, had long sent his parents searching for work. Over time, they took odd jobs in various towns on the Navajo Reservation. Then, during World War II, they moved to Hobbs for war-related work. Finally, they found permanent employment at the Jemez Day School. They would be its only two teachers for the next 25 years.

Like his nomadic ancestors, 12-year-old Momaday had adapted well to the family's westward migration. At Jemez, as in Diné (Navajo) country before, he reveled in new cultural traditions and lore. While the language of the Kiowa still whispered distantly in his ear, and English had become his most confident tongue, he says that he learned the Jemez Towa dialect "to fit myself into the life there." Even then, he knew language was his most fluid means of moving through the world. Only later did he learn that Towa and Kiowa share origins in the Tanoan family of languages. "So," he says, "you might say I've always been related to the pueblo in some way."

Life at Jemez was poetry in motion. *I had somehow got myself deep into the world, deeper than ever before, he wrote later. Around me were all the colors of the earth that I have ever seen.* There were long gravel roads with coyotes and roadrunners racing beside them. There were tortillas and chile, and his favorite, posole. There were Native dances, Catholic ceremonials, and elders of wise bearing. There were rambling rides through red canyons on his strawberry roan gelding, Pecos. There was even a poet, the noted New Mexican priest and author Fray Angélico Chávez.

"He was at Jemez Pueblo as the postmaster when I went there, and I used to go down to the post office

"Oral tradition is always just one generation away from extinction. It has to be taken seriously."

and chat with him," Momaday recalls. "I got up the nerve to talk to him about poetry. And he was extremely kind to me and helpful."

Momaday left Jemez at 17 when he and his parents decided to expand his educational horizon. He spent his senior year of high school at the Augusta Military Academy in Fort Defiance, Virginia, where in addition to his studies, he cultivated a lifelong passion for football and learned to fence. After graduation, he enrolled at UNM, choosing to study poetry for its kinship to the oral tradition. "If I could be recognized as a poet," he says, "that seemed to me the kind of immortality I could claim."

In 1959, after graduation, marriage to his first wife, Gaye, and a year teaching oral English to Jicarilla Apache students in Dulce, Momaday snagged a creative writing fellowship at Stanford University. For four years, he studied American poets—including Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, and Frederick Goddard Tuckerman—and the English poetic forms—iambic pentameter and rhymed verse—that still influence his work. He then took his first teaching post at the University of California, Santa Barbara. But not long after arriving, the dedicated poet took a life-changing detour.

"I had written myself into a corner with poetry," he says. "I felt I needed more elbow room, because poetry is a very concentrated activity."

And so, in this way, with these words, Momaday began his story again: *Dypaloh. There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting.*

**A** few years later, the phone rang in Santa Barbara. It was Momaday's editor on the line. "She said, 'Scott, are you sitting down?'" he recalls. "I wasn't, but I should have been. And she said, 'You've just been awarded the Pulitzer Prize.'"

It was a seminal moment in Native American literature, and in Momaday's career. "It did change my life immediately," he says. "I got a lot of acclaim, and I

did not have to worry about publishing or perishing from that point on. But then, I didn't know how to proceed after that. How do you top that?"

Momaday needn't have worried. In 1969, with publication of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the author's star rose higher. *House Made of Dawn* had been set in familiar Jemez territory, but *The Way to Rainy Mountain* took Momaday into unknown and sacred terrain. *Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon remembered earth*, he wrote, layering Kiowa history and folklore with personal memoir. The book took the author back to Devils Tower, along the Kiowa migration route from Montana to the southern plains, and finally back to the arbor at the family homestead where Pohd-lohk had bestowed his Kiowa name.

With his father serving as his translator, Momaday met the keepers of the Kiowa culture, those who had stayed at Rainy Mountain and preserved the oral tradition. Now, in the place where they had been and were still spoken, the stories rose to meet Momaday like old friends.

"I had heard these stories all my life and taken them for granted," he says. "Suddenly, I realized that they were extremely fragile, and so I started writing them down."

One memorable afternoon, they visited Ko-sahn, who as a child in 1887 had attended the last Kiowa Sun Dance. "She was a hundred years old and very frail, but she had a wonderful memory," he says. "I kept asking her questions, and she kept denying that she knew anything about it. 'Oh,' she said, 'don't ask me that, too far back, when dogs could talk.' And then she would answer the question in detail. This is part of the oral tradition. It was incumbent upon her to protest, to perform."

In one afternoon with Ko-sahn, the only time he would ever see her, Momaday's confidence in the connection between language and culture was reaffirmed. Ko-sahn's voice and gestures and laughter, combined with his father's skilled interpretation, authenticated his belief that language, like a long life, is a miracle.

"I think we became human beings when we acquired language," he says. "And though I am a writer, I say that spoken language is more vital than writing. We can write something down, put it away in a desk drawer, and it will be there when we come back. In the oral tradition, you have to speak with dedication. You have to listen very carefully. You have to remember what you hear. Oral tradition is always just one generation away from extinction. It has to be taken seriously."

There would be many other stories, written and spoken, many other adventures at home and abroad. In faraway places like Moscow, where Momaday taught literature at the state university and became so lonely he instinctively started to paint. Or among the indigenous Khanty people of western Siberia,

where he helped revive an old and dying bear festival, ensuring its passage to future generations. Today, a tree in western Siberia has the name "Momaday" carved deeply into its trunk.

The Siberia project was an initiative of the Buffalo Trust, the nonprofit foundation Momaday founded with his late wife, Barbara. Its mission is to help indigenous peoples, especially children in crisis, hold on to their traditional values and cultural identity. One of his latest undertakings, intended to revitalize and benefit the trust, is closer to home. The project, a hand-printed broadside of Momaday's 1976 poem "Forms of the Earth at Abiquiu" pays tribute to one of the author's own creative icons, Georgia O'Keeffe.

"I met Georgia O'Keeffe in 1972 and spent several lunches with her at Abiquiu," he says. "She liked goat cheese and fine wine. She was going blind. We talked about different things, and I think I fell in love with her."

Momaday collaborated on the edition of 75 broadsides with Thomas Leech, director of the Press at the Palace of the Governors, part of the New Mexico History Museum. Leech printed the poem on handmade paper that he colored in the deep red hue of Abiquiu clay. Each is finished with a hand-colored sketch by Momaday of O'Keeffe as he remembers or imagines her.

In the small study where Momaday sits to color the broadsides, a visual sweep of his success in the Native and non-Native worlds is on view. At one extreme are large-scale photos of his parents and paternal grandparents, clad in elaborate Indian garb. On the other are his delicate line drawings of O'Keeffe. A certificate of recognition from the Western Writer's of America Hall of Fame underscores his influential roots in the West, while his own photographs from Russia reflect an equally significant role as a global explorer. On an open desktop, not one but three wide-brimmed hats rest side by side, waiting, perhaps, for Momaday's next explorations amid the radiant geography of story—remembered, imagined, and real.

"Every one of us is an individual, and each one of us sees the world in a different way," he says. "The writer has nothing else, really, as his subject but his experience. And the writer polishes that, and expresses it, and works on it in such a way that it becomes worth preservation for its own sake. If you do that, you've done about as much as you can." ■

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

**Facing page, from top:** Momaday's artworks include a sketch of Georgia O'Keeffe on a broadside poem he wrote, and *Untitled Print (Bear)*.

## FORMS OF THE EARTH AT ABIQUIU

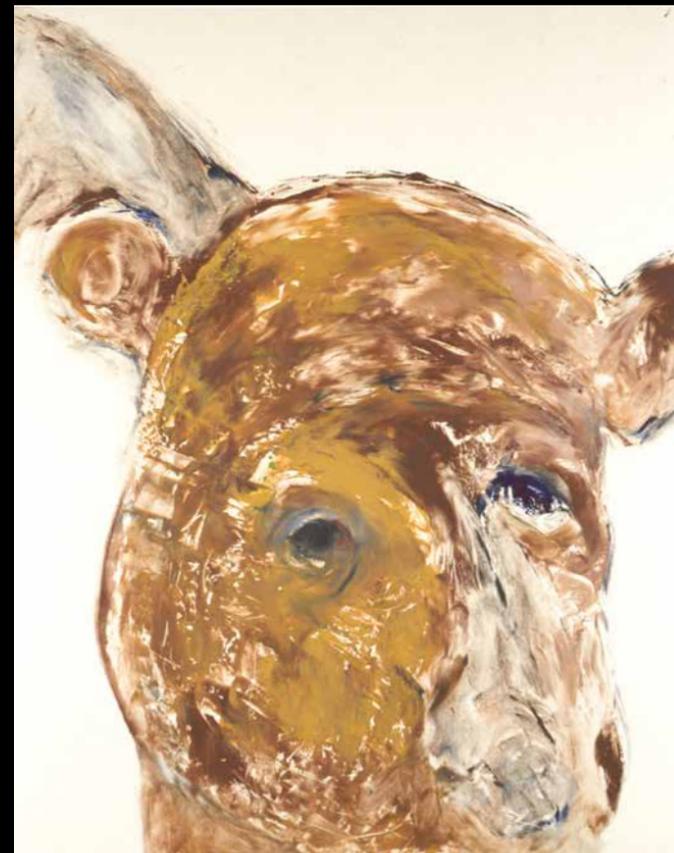
For Georgia O'Keeffe

I imagine the time of our meeting  
There among the forms of the earth at Abiquiu,  
And other times that followed from the one—  
An easy bartering of stories,  
And late luncheons of wine and cheese.  
All around were beautiful objects,  
Clean and precise in their beauty, like bone.  
Indeed, bone: a snake in the filaments of bone,  
The skulls of cows and sheep;  
And the many smooth stones in the window,  
In the flat winter light were beautiful  
I wanted to feel the sun in the stones—  
The ashen, far-flung winter sun.  
And then, in those days, too,  
I made you the gift of a small, brown stone,  
And you described it with the tips of your fingers  
And knew at once that it was beautiful—  
At once, accordingly, you knew,  
As you knew the forms of the earth at Abiquiu.  
That time involves them and then bear away,  
Beautiful, various, remote,  
In failing light, and the coming of cold.

-N. Scott Momaday



From *A Whispered Homage to Georgia O'Keeffe*, a suite drawn and hand-colored by N. Scott Momaday, ©2017. Proceeds to support The Buffalo Trust, Dr. Momaday's foundation working to help indigenous children in need. Seventy-five copies were printed at the Press at the Palace of the Governors. This is number



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## Our Times with Miss O'Keeffe (and Other Stories)

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# The Good Neighbor

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Immersed in northern New Mexico culture, author William deBuys has emerged as one of the region's strongest storytellers, conservationists, and defenders.

BY CARMELLA PADILLA

*"New Mexico, the words of which enchant me beyond reason, suggesting not only a particular home and geography, but an existence and a history shared with others, a notion of belonging in time and place, the essence of community."*

—William deBuys, *The Walk*

September 1972. William deBuys rides shotgun through the high-mountain village of Peñasco. Old adobes, abandoned buildings, and weathered mom-and-pop shops huddle close to the potholed roadway and zip past the window, unfolding for deBuys a scattershot view of utterly unfamiliar surroundings.

Flashing on the name of a roadside bar—El Norteño—deBuys mulls its deeper meaning. At 22, the American studies graduate thought he knew something of the Southwest. But as his friend's Volkswagen pushes north toward Taos, deBuys' perception of the local landscape, and his place within it, shifts. Northern New Mexico, he realizes, is unlike any other American place.

*Then I get it, deBuys will write later in *River of Traps*, his 1990 nonfiction collaboration with photographer Alex Harris, the friend driving the speeding VW. *We are in the Southwest only from an Anglo point of view. The people who settled Peñasco came from the south, from Mexico, and before that, New Spain. These mountains were the northern frontier, the home of northerners, norteños.**

Forty-five years later, the High Road to Peñasco and points beyond reflects the summer heat as cars wind and climb into an eye-dazzling vista of mountain and sky. The view is big, but the string of villages

along the route suggests smaller worlds within. Nearing Truchas, a series of memorial signs launch a roadside narrative of deceased locals, loved ones with old, lilting Spanish names like Cipriano, Tranquilino, Rosalina, Sabinita. Just past Ojo Sarco, the radio mysteriously switches itself to a rocking *ranchera* on the Spanish station. *Hey baby, qué pasó? Thought I was your only vato.*

The song trails into the turnoff to El Valle, a tiny village in the crescent-shaped valley of the Río de las Trampas where, with the exception of scattered years, deBuys has lived and written since 1975. Moments after leaving the asphalt, juniper and pine frame a veil of road dust. A *camposanto*, circa 1750, appears, aflame with American flags and plastic flowers. The cemetery is a dramatic reminder that life in this and other northern villages is rooted in the lands of long ago. And if that's not enough, nearly four decades of deBuys' writings readily remind us again.

Since his drive-by epiphany about the norteño nature of his adopted home, deBuys has honed experience and expression into his singular sense of this place and its people—a physical and cultural geography he calls "the Deep North." His series of six New Mexico-based nonfiction books illuminate the region as an equally beautiful and vulnerable ecosystem, encouraging native and newcomer alike to live responsibly within it. Other books and projects

Claire  
WORKS

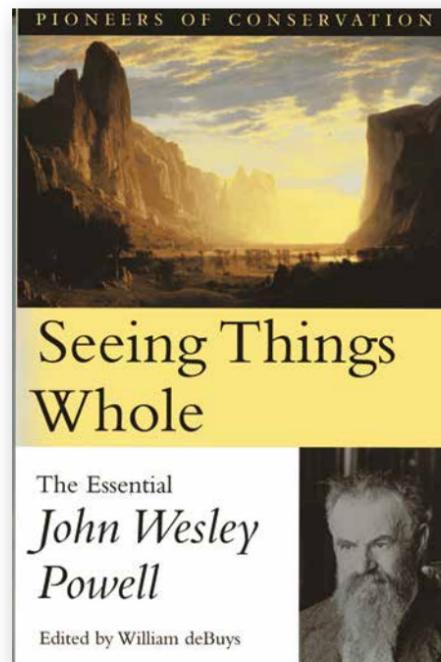
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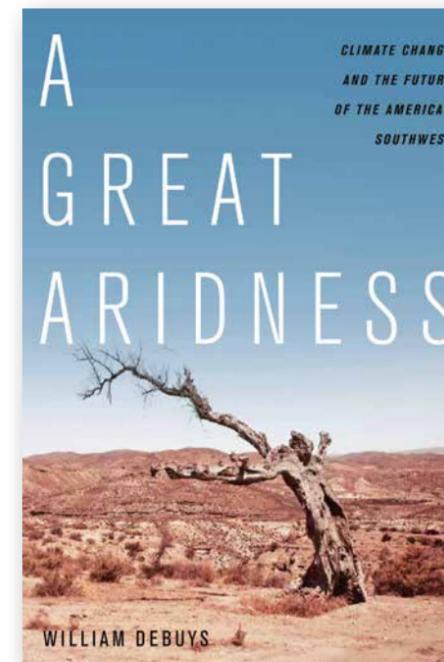


immerse readers in places farther afield, from California to Laos to Nepal. In each, deBuys blends refined skills of research and observation, a rich use of metaphor, and a balance of humility and humor to evoke a respectful, keenly felt connection to his subjects.

DeBuys' passionately powerful prose, as well as his ongoing work in environmental conservation and social activism, have earned him international renown as one of the most respected environmental, cultural, and social historians of the Southwest. In September, the Pulitzer Prize finalist and Pushcart Prize winner received the New Mexico Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, the state's highest artistic honor. In letters of nomination, other notable writers and environmental figures lauded his writing, scholarship, and personal commitment to New Mexico, even placing him among such nonfiction and naturalist pioneers as John Wesley Powell, John McPhee, and Peter Matthiessen.

Ethnomusicologist, environmentalist, and author Jack Loeffler, himself a Governor's Award winner, described deBuys as one of the state's "finest writers, clearest thinkers, and most refined ethicists." Don Usner, deBuys' co-author and photographer on the 2006 *Valles Caldera: A Vision for New Mexico's National Preserve*, praised his choice

Books / GOVERNOR'S ARTS AWARDS

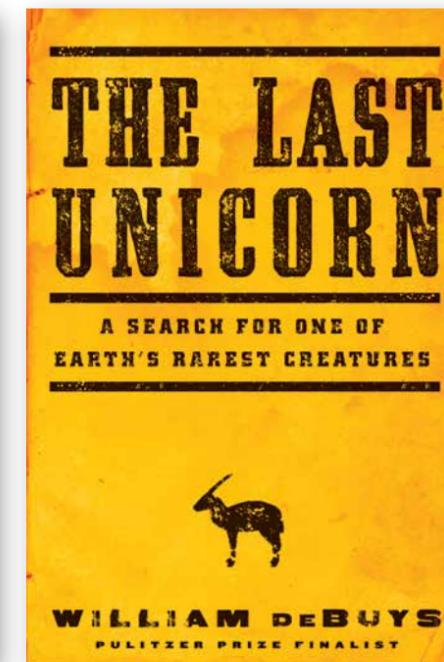


of "projects aimed to effect positive social change." And Melissa Savage, author and director of the Four Corners Institute, singled out deBuys' "fine-boned prose" and "lifetime of engagement" in the rugged heights of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

On this June afternoon, deBuys sits in the shade of his Deep North front porch, on his 40 acres of farmland. It's but a few steps outside his compact, pitched-roof house, and a few steps more from the two-room adobe office where he writes. Immersed in blue sky and birdsong, the view from here makes clear that deBuys' modest live-work space is merely a mortal practicality. It's a gateway to the grandeur of the landscape—the hayfield, the cottonwoods, the river, the acequia, the meadow, the canyon, the pine forest, the beyond.

Pointing across the skyline, deBuys declares, "I know this set of hills better than any other human being now living. Just because, for forty years, I've walked in them almost every day, and I never see anybody else."

It's no idle boast. DeBuys knows more of his environs than most *nativos*, a fact with which both his El Valle neighbors and his readers would agree. In his soles—and his soul—he is every bit a *norteno*, a devoted student and steward of his surroundings. His easy conversation and eager hospitality



feel no less than homegrown.

But it was a long road to knowing New Mexico. "To be brutally honest," he admits, "I wasn't sure whether New Mexico was to the left of Arizona or to the right. This was completely new ground."

The suburban Baltimore house of deBuys' youth backed up to a forested ravine. "The woods were my refuge. I spent a lot of time there alone," he says.

William deBuys Sr., an avid hunter and fisherman, encouraged his only son's outdoor pursuits. His mother, Judith, "was more bookish," deBuys says. "She told me repeatedly, when I was in grade school, that if I didn't do my homework, I'd grow up to be a ditchdigger. Of course, I did my homework and I got all kinds of degrees, and I still grew up to be a ditchdigger, which is what I do irrigating this place."

In the late 1960s, deBuys took courses in American studies and creative writing at the University of North Carolina. He absorbed literary histories and traditions inside and out of his Southern comfort zone, focusing his undergraduate thesis on William Faulkner. His studies gave rise to a prizewinning short story, his first published work. The tale involved an old man whose life was firmly fixed in a rural valley along a

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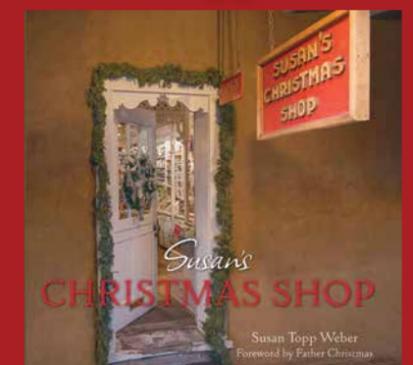
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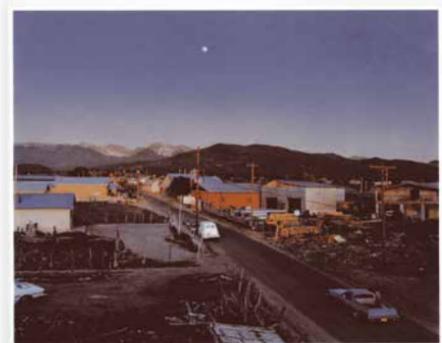
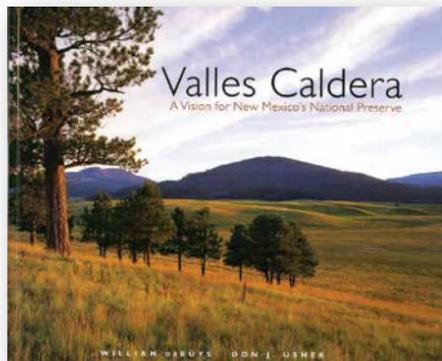
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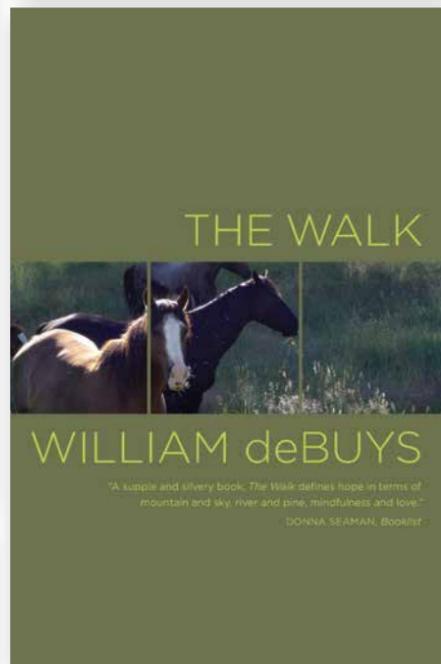
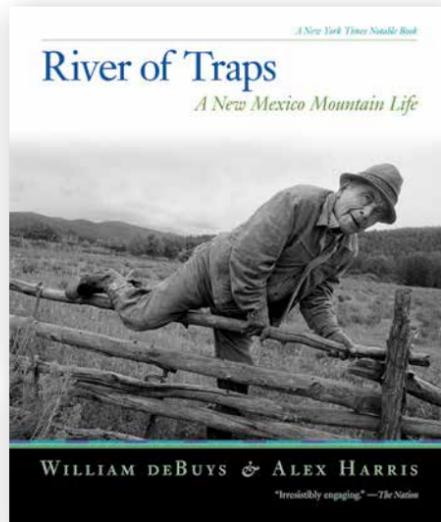
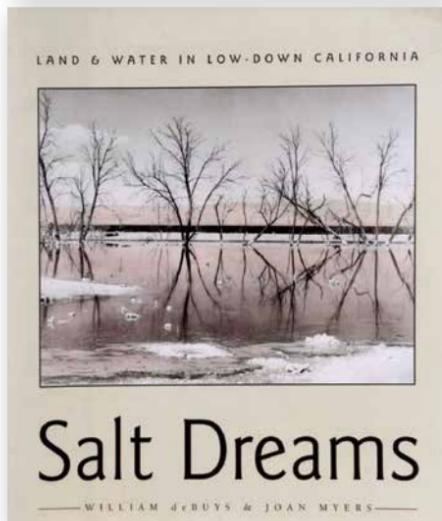
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ENCHANTMENT  
AND  
EXPLOITATION

The Life and Hard Times  
of a New Mexico Mountain Range

William deBuys



river that threatened to overflow its banks. The story, deBuys realized later, foreshadowed things to come. The terrain in his imagined tale was a lot like El Valle. And, in part, the story's success brought him to the attention of Robert Coles, a preeminent Harvard psychiatrist who was living in Albuquerque, researching his book *Eskimos, Chicanos, Indians*. He hired deBuys and a young Duke University photographer named Alex Harris to assist. Their 12-month

assignment: document local Hispano and Indian places and faces.

It was a wide left turn from Chapel Hill to Chimayó, where, just months after graduation, the North Carolina newcomers ascended the High Road in search of a place to rent. Although a local realtor warned that any Anglo outsider hoping to live in northern New Mexico was looking for trouble, deBuys settled in Truchas, Harris in Peñasco. Harris quickly filled his days making photographs. DeBuys made a beeline to an Española bar and a beautiful woman, engaging in a fraught and ultimately failed love affair. A year later, he had nothing to show.

"I was an absolute failure as a research assistant," he says. "A disaster."

Not entirely. Even as deBuys packed his bags for San Francisco, where he landed a carpentry gig in a construction company, he had begun to understand a vital thing about the north. "Coles wanted me to write about the people I met," he says. "I came to the conclusion that I couldn't write about the people until I understood the land."

DeBuys still felt like an outsider. Yet some sense of place resonated inside him. "I remember my first drive up the High Road from Chimayó to Truchas, thinking those shrubby piñon-and-juniper-stippled hills and that pink degraded granite soil were so ugly," deBuys says. "And now, to me, they're supremely beautiful. In that first year, my aesthetic completely shifted."

Still, driving away from this bewildering backcountry, deBuys had no intention of coming back.

"Tap, tap, tap," he said, "you make too many words."  
"Well, I'm writing a book."  
"What about?"

"Maybe about these mountains. I don't know. I'm working it out."

"I see," he said. "Maybe when you finish you can decide what it is about."

El Valle, 1975. DeBuys explains his morning writing practice to Jacobo Romero, the old man who lives next door. Romero is curious, gregarious, as grounded in his place as the old man in the prizewinning short story from deBuys' undergraduate

days. Much of Romero's world also revolves around water, a small and vigorous Río de las Trampas (River of Traps), which feeds the life of his ancestral village. From it flows a cedar-lined acequia, a centuries-old irrigation ditch. On this, and most summer mornings, Romero deems ditch work, as well as cattle herding, fence building, hay harvesting, horseshoeing, hoe sharpening, and other old-fashioned farmwork, far nobler labors than deBuys' efforts to turn type into mountains.

DeBuys had returned to New Mexico in May with his future wife, Anne, a painter, and a dream of writing a book. They arrived at the house Harris was then renting in El Valle, a place Harris considered the most beautiful of all the northern villages. DeBuys intended a brief stay while seeking a place in Santa Fe. Tucked inside the valley's forested rim, however, the couple felt inspired by its wildness and sheltered from the social turmoil of the times. "We came and stayed," deBuys says. "And stayed."

From there, deBuys began to explore the subject of his book: the Sangre de Cristos. Strapping a pack on his back, he undertook his research alone, first on foot and later on horseback, going deep into the wilderness in all seasons. He focused on geology and ecology, desiring "to write a book that didn't involve people." As he got deeper into the Sangres, however, he saw that generations of norteños had spun a network of mountain trails that connected their lives to their landscape. "Turns out all those trails led down to communities," he says. "I had to follow the trails."

In time, the trails led to graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin, where deBuys parlayed his research into a master's and a doctorate, leading him to complete *Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range*. The 1985 book explores the essential humanity of the land. He wrote: *The trick of living in the mountains begins with understanding the power of the landscape and the limits it imposes. By extension, the region's history begins with the story of how people have learned that lesson—and at times forgotten it.*

The lesson had unfolded slowly as deBuys struggled to find his voice and often wished to quit. But a deep need to find his unique space in New Mexico moved him forward. "One of the things I was doing was, to use a phrase by Wes Jackson, to become native to the place by understanding it deeply enough to make some claim that I belonged here," he says. "Not that I could ever be truly native, but I wanted to put down my own roots."

DeBuys' best lessons in native living would be imparted by old Jacobo. "He took us under his wing in a kind of grandfatherly way and accepted us, in a sense, as students in a tutorial about this place, this world, and this land," he says. "We were invited to basically participate in the life of this place with our neighbors."

It was an unusual invitation, particularly at a time when many local Hispanics were resisting the incursion of hippies in northern lands. But deBuys and Harris were not exactly hippies. Each was engaged in a demanding craft, committed to a work ethic that Romero respected. When the deBuyses and Harris decided to purchase farmland at the bottom of the valley, where they would eventually build houses, raise children, and share the land's labors, Romero didn't resist. He gave them entrée to his village and to the old ways of his people, for the simple reason that they were willing to work hard alongside him.

Over 10 years, Romero tested their mountain mettle in all weather, even as jobs or children took them temporarily elsewhere, even as raging floodwaters threatened to wash their wondrous patch of earth away. When Romero died, in 1985, their bond was deep, the loss devastating. The pair preserved his spirit and his wisdom in their 1990 *River of Traps*. The book won acclaim for capturing New Mexico's cultural complexity through the experience, grace, and grit of a genuinely old-time norteño. In 1990, it was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, and in 1991 it was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Today, both it and *Enchantment and Exploitation* remain highly regarded New Mexico classics.

To his dying day, Romero never understood deBuys' reason for sitting indoors, typing, as the sun rose over the Sangres. Yet for deBuys, in literature and in life, the old man was the character of a lifetime.

"He was a truly great storyteller. He was personally generous and knowledgeable. And to top it all off, he was also wise. I've had some great mentors in my life. But I think Jacobo is probably the greatest one of all."

Romero's influence elevated deBuys' writing to a new tier in expressing a fully human way of being on the land. Perhaps more important, he instilled in deBuys' being the most essential lesson of dwelling in the Deep North: "the necessity," says deBuys, "of being *un buen vecino*."

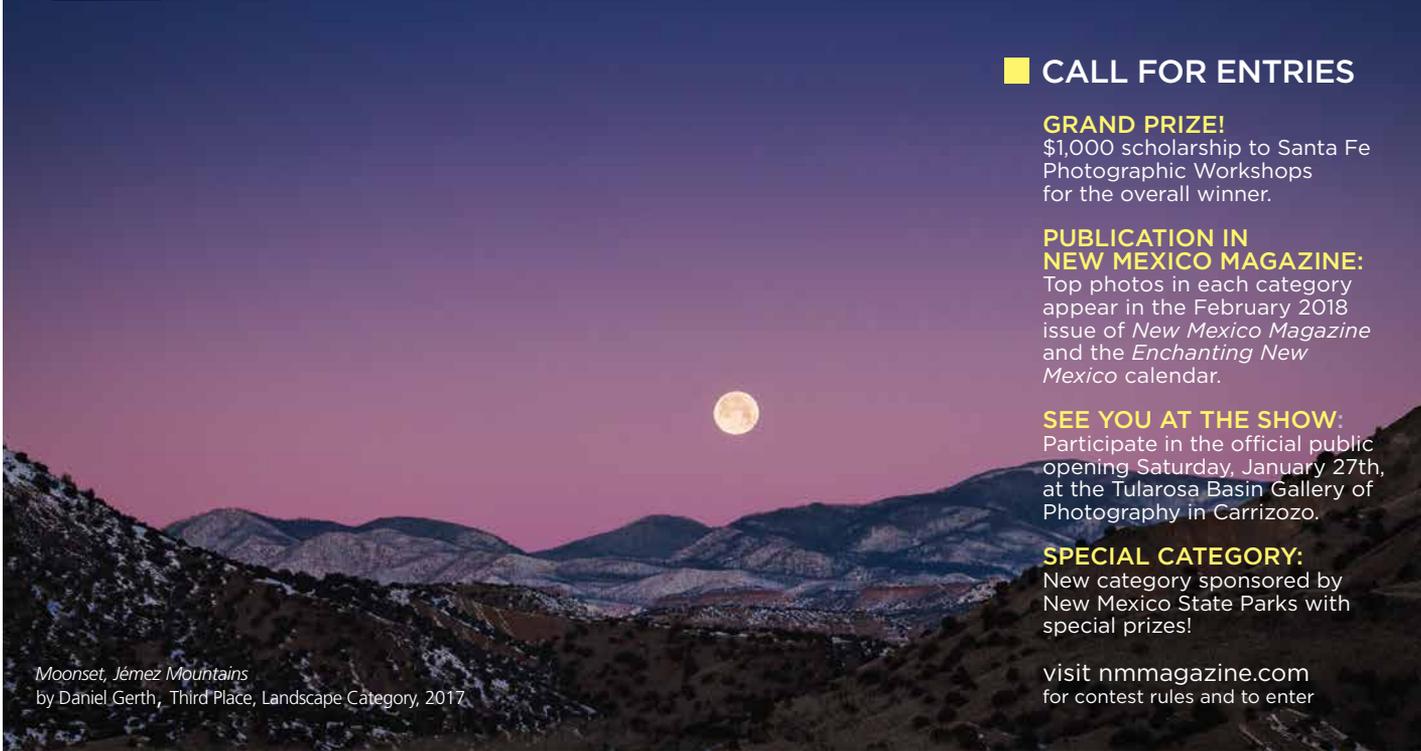
These days I wonder less than I used to whether I belong here. And I have no plans to go away.

In deBuys' 2007 memoir *The Walk*, the author traces the circuit of his daily passage through El Valle to craft a profoundly inspired work of history and meditation. As he guides us through the topography of his village, he accesses a more interior trail, a path carved in delicate steps of love, family, divorce, and the loss of a beloved horse. *In this way, a homely, well-worn path becomes a route into and through the self, leading to destinations unimagined.*

"Just as Jacobo was such an important mentor in my life, this land has been a mentor," he says. "It's taught me that I should live alertly." DeBuys' expertise has been supported by complementary work in conservation and education. Over the decades, he has served as professor of documentary studies at the former College of Santa Fe, executive director of the North Carolina Nature Conservancy, and program officer for water projects and rural livelihoods for the New Mexico Community Foundation. His conservation work permanently protected more than 150,000 acres of wildlands in North Carolina and the Southwest. Every experience, he says, expands his community network, nourishes his environmental knowledge, and feeds the well of his writing. »



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"I'm really lucky," he says. "Part of my work ethic is to work hard to try to justify the good fortune that I've received, and to give something back in exchange."

His activism includes pointing out the extremes that threaten the region's natural and cultural riches—climate change, poverty, the extinction of traditional lifeways—often with an aim toward shifting public policy. His 2011 book *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest* and the 2016 film *The Colorado*, which he co-wrote, enhanced and advanced the conversation on climate change. With a forthcoming collaborative investigative journalism project conceived by deBuys, he intends to stir dialogue, raise public awareness, and improve child well-being in New Mexico.

DeBuys' latest release is *First Impressions: A Reader's Journey to Iconic Places of the American Southwest*, co-authored with the late borderlands historian David J. Weber. The book surveys 15 sites as described in historical accounts by explorers and settlers. Its title takes the conversation back to deBuys' first impressions of norteño life along the High Road—where his own life and writings are now solidly embedded in its history.

"I've driven the High Road thousands of times, and it never looks the same," he muses. "Every angle of sun from solstice to solstice, every angle of shadow from dawn to dusk—it looks different every time. It's endlessly fascinating." ■

Governor's Arts Award recipient **Carmella Padilla** edited the new book *Borderless: The Art of Luis Tapia* (Museum of Latin American Art/University of Oklahoma Press).

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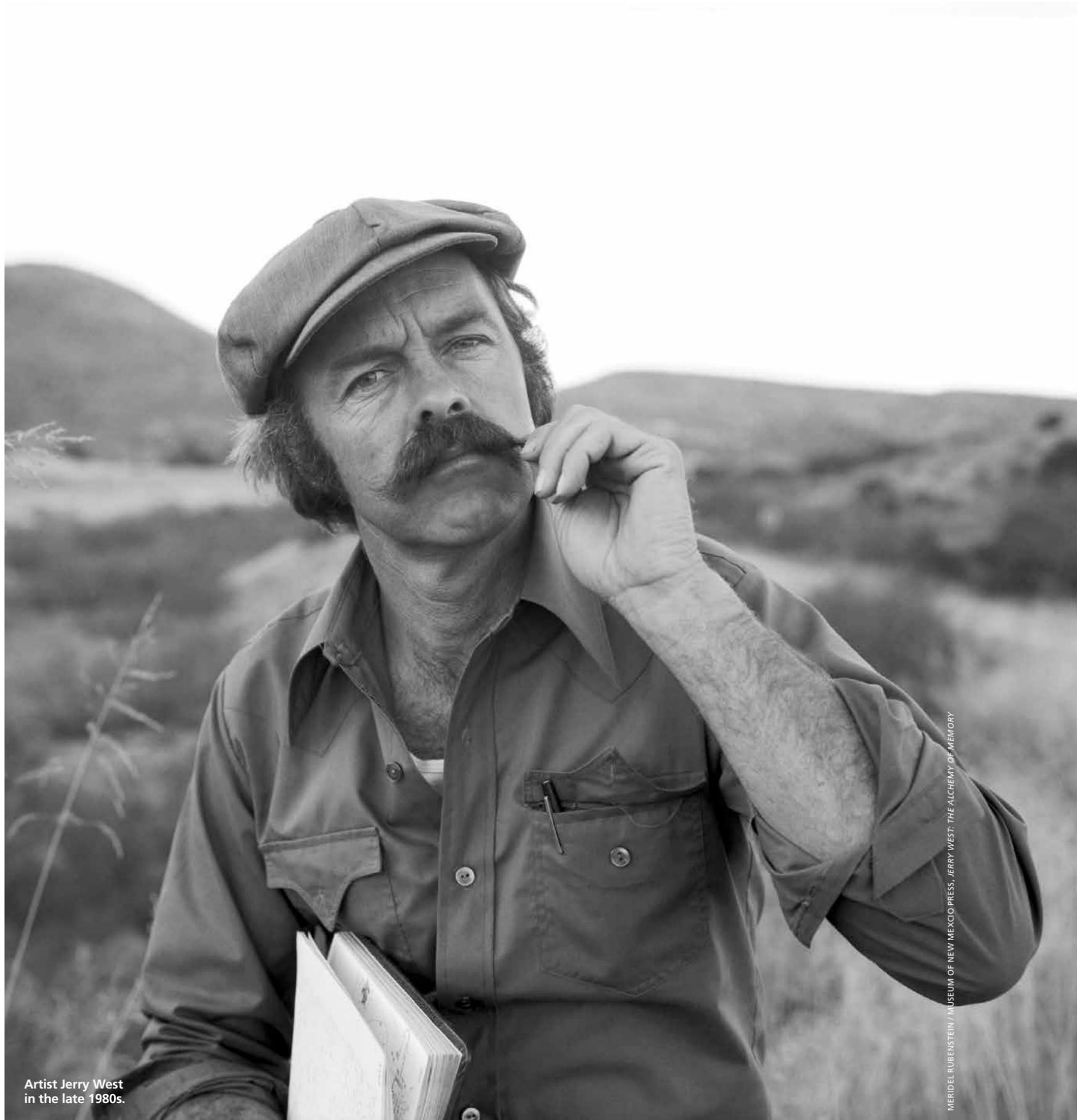
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Artist Jerry West  
in the late 1980s.

MERIDEL RUBENSTEIN / MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO PRESS, JERRY WEST, THE ALCHEMY OF MEMORY

# MAVERICK DREAMS

A prairie family in hard times set Jerry West on a twisted course to artistic acclaim and a New Mexico far beyond reach.

BY CARMELLA PADILLA

*“To be born on the prairie means to wander all your life, always being pulled back. It means accident, incident, drama, movement. It always means dreams.” — Jerry West*

**T**he old adobe homestead is on fire. Jerry West walks down a row of weathered fence posts. Two figures, West’s parents, emerge from their gnarled curves. A barefooted Mildred holds a baby to her breast. Husband Hal is rooted in his cowboy boots. Three sharp strings of barbed wire separate them—and bind them together. Their five children—five ravens—roam nearby.

Dark smoke from the burning homestead spirals into the orange sky. Mildred and Hal appear unfazed. They are pillars of their hard-won patch of prairie earth, both of them unwilling to abandon their stake.

West’s 2003 painting *Prairie Pillars with Five Ravens* was only a dream. Yet the pressures it expressed were keenly vivid and real. So real that, as with West’s most evocative dreams, the artist merged memory and reverie into a painting.

At 84, West has produced a wide-ranging oeuvre of similarly dramatic dream narratives. Together, they combine his deep-seated reverence for American regionalism with potent recollections of family life on

the windswept prairie 18 miles southwest of Santa Fe. West’s paintbrush maps a fantastical world of distant farmsteads with lonely windmills. Rattlesnakes, ravens, lizards, coyotes, and other Southwestern creatures share space with the living and the dead. Storm clouds, fire plumes, or warheads threaten, yet a solid sense of belonging fills the frame. Come what may, the prairie is home.

While the dreams of West the painter inspire his intimate artistic territory, the everyday experiences of West the wanderer cast him as a unique figure in New Mexico’s creative landscape. He stands as an iconic artist and beloved local character, a “Maverick American,” as Southwest art historian and curator MaLin Wilson-Powell calls him in the 2015 retrospective book *Jerry West: The Alchemy of Memory* (Museum of New Mexico Press). There, cultural critic Rebecca Solnit likens West to a bridge straddling the “old self-reliant prairie world of homesteaders and horse breakers ... and the new internationalism of big ideas.”

Nearly a century of history—from the Great Depression to World War II, the new millennium to

Facing page: Jerry West in his studio, 2014.

today—informs West’s canvases, connecting viewers to pivotal points of New Mexico’s social and cultural development. With a flair for magical realism, he propels viewers across time, space, and mind, conjuring and honoring a New Mexico that is long gone but, thanks to West’s brushstrokes, ever present.

“I believe as much in the story as I do in the paint,” he says. “The dreams are in the story.”

**O**n a Sunday morning in late summer, West retraces the hopeful and sometimes harrowing path that brought him to his two-story painting studio on the homestead south of Santa Fe where he came of age. Back in the forties, his late artist father, Harold E. “Hal” West, hitched his own dreams to these far-flung flatlands. Today the area remains a nucleus for generations of Wests who, like Jerry, share Hal’s idiosyncratic way of life.

Living in the family’s original adobe is West’s younger brother Archie, who, at 80, West says, is “the family cowboy who still runs cows on the Galisteo.” West’s son, Joe, is down the road, in the place West built for Mildred to spend her final years. Joe, an award-winning country/folk singer-songwriter, is a cult musical hero (see “Joe West’s New Mexico Songbook,” [nmmag.us/JoeWestNM](http://nmmag.us/JoeWestNM)). In 2014, the London *Telegraph* named his *Blood Red Velvet* one of the year’s best country music albums, praising it as “strange and appealing.” The same can be said of his father’s allegorical dreamscapes.

Guiding a guest across the sweeping narrative of his life in an hours-long conversation, West proves himself a storyteller extraordinaire. “The story of my growing up is a story of family, of the hard years and the magical years, of the love mixed with all the other things that went with it,” he says.

West’s gravelly voice is soft and unhurried. His hands move constantly, gesturing or sketching. His words weave wonder and reverence for the New Mexican way of life, for the land, and for the cultures that collide and coexist here. His laid-back demeanor belies the boldly emotional paintings that fill his studio: A skeletal image of his sickly father looms over his shoulder; a portrait of his mother cradling a rooster commands a wall. Like them, West recounts his story with unflinching honesty.

“In the twenties and thirties,” he says, “no matter who you were or where you came from, it was a really hard time.”

With poor, working-class origins in southern Oklahoma, Hal was no romantic. He was a farmer who, West says, also had talent “as a fine painter of signs.”

At the urging of his older sister, Etna, he came to Santa Fe in 1926 to explore its opportunities in art. Etna had arrived a year earlier and made friends with Gustave Baumann, Gerald Cassidy, and other creative movers. Hal easily fell into his sister’s circle but, practical-minded, took a job at a downtown filling station.

“Hal had it in him to be a real thoughtful painter, and Santa Fe opened up a whole world to him,” West says. “But he did everything from a working-class perspective.”

He befriended a co-worker, an Ohio native whose niece taught in a one-room schoolhouse back home. Hal hitchhiked to New York a year later and stopped off to see the friend, who drove him to meet Mildred Olive. He continued to New York and stayed there for a time, but kept looking west—toward Mildred.

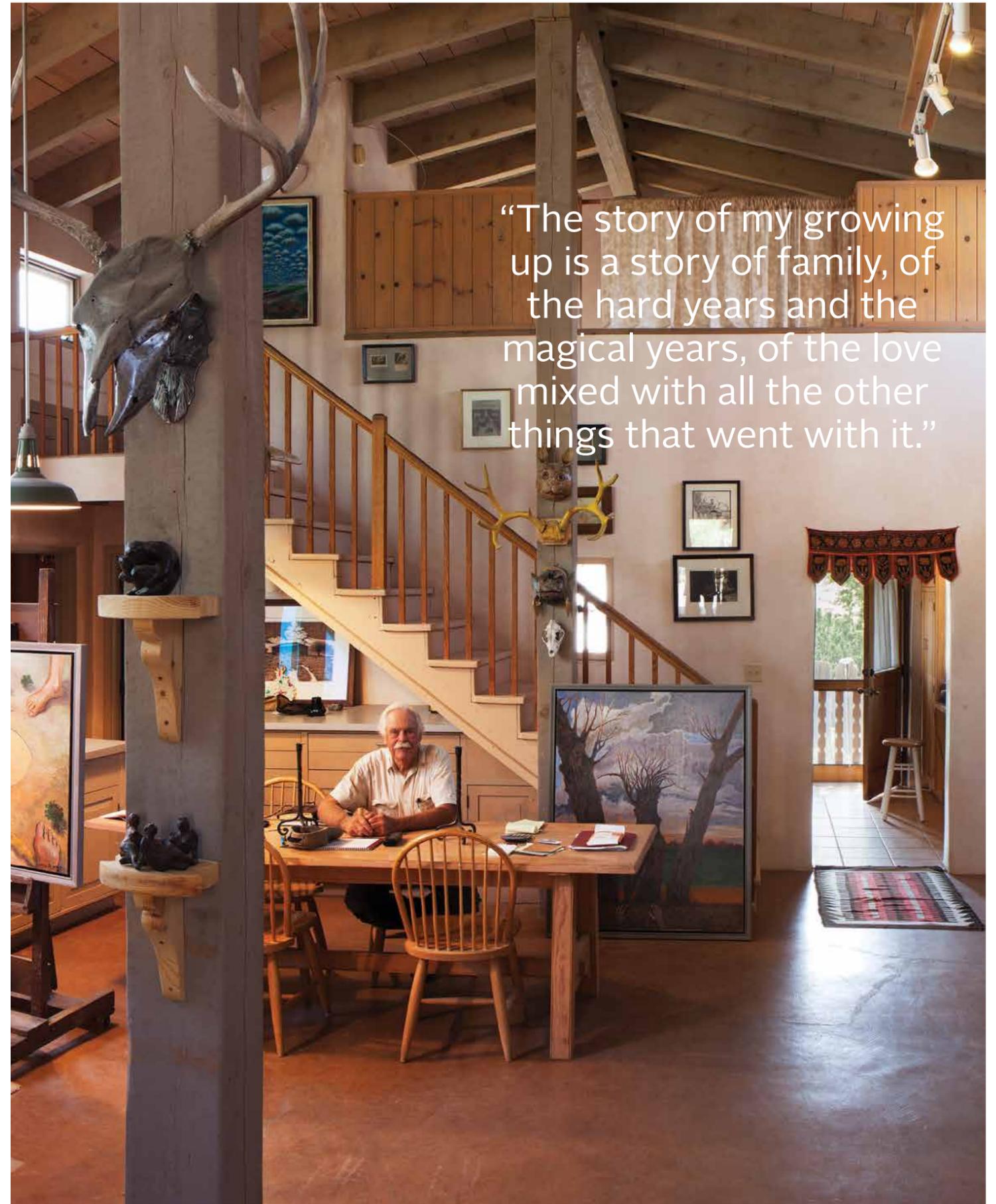
West sings an old country standard as his story unwinds. *Highways are happy ways when they lead the way to home*. Hal picked up Mildred. The two eloped. The highway eventually led back to Santa Fe and a rented home on a tree-lined alameda.

**H**al bumped through the Depression working as a cowboy on the San Marcos spread south of Santa Fe and at a brief job in Ohio, where Jerry West was born in 1933. Hal got the family back to Santa Fe, where he put in stints at McCrossen’s weaving shop on the Plaza and as a WPA artist crafting prints and paintings for schools throughout the state. “He became known as a cowboy artist, painting from the people’s point of view,” West says.

In 1936, he tried homesteading in La Ciénega and later logged time as a caretaker at Puyé Cliffs, in Santa Clara Pueblo, then as a guard at Santa Fe’s Japanese internment camp and at a German prisoner-of-war camp in Texas. He disclosed little about the nature of those latter jobs, but he saved enough to buy a spread. West was 12 when he and Hal met a man on the Plaza with a 160-acre homestead for sale. “For \$500, and \$25 a month, he sold it to Hal right there,” West recalls. “Hal finally had his own piece of the prairie.”

West’s memories of visiting the internment camp and his father’s sketches of it inspired his 2009 painting *A Westward Glance, a Place Called the “Jap Camp,” a Strange Story*. Rows of pitch-roofed barracks fill the frame, beneath a dusty and unusually colorless Santa Fe sky. The scene is viewed from the vantage of Hal’s brother, West’s Uncle Gene, a consummate cowboy who kept watch while riding horseback around the camp’s perimeter. West depicts Gene in a slumped posture, suggesting the overwhelming nature of his task. Hal, however, withheld judgment. “It was a job,” West says.

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“The story of my growing up is a story of family, of the hard years and the magical years, of the love mixed with all the other things that went with it.”



In West's 1981 painting *Flight over Juárez* (collection of Barbara Gehring), his father, Hal, pulls him and his brother Archie with an old Ford, then launches them to glide over the city's backstreets. Facing page: West's 2009 *Intricate Shuffle of God's Living Creatures* (collection of Robert Nelson).

But a steady job couldn't dim the economic challenges and worries of wartime. The homestead had no electricity or other luxuries. Only long days of hard work sustained the family. As Hal began struggling with a brain tumor, he worked less, and the pressures intensified. The family's isolation and economic uncertainty further strained them. Without going into details, West says, "There were dark times, but all families are complicated. Everyone was struggling."

West struggled, too. He spent nights with Hal to keep him from hurting himself in the throes of severe convulsions. He lost sleep, worried as he was about his father's survival and confused about how the world would survive the atomic bomb being constructed at nearby Los Alamos.

At school, his talent for drawing and his easy personality fostered camaraderie with teachers and friends. At Santa Fe High School, he launched a lifelong friendship with Jozef Bakos, one of the famed Cinco Pintores, who taught there. "It was almost like he adopted me. I learned painting and plastering from him."

Bakos likely influenced the awarding of an art scholarship to West, to study at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas with noted painter and printmaker Elmer Schooley—but West turned it down. Instead, in 1952, he and his sister Sarah left Santa Fe to attend Colorado State University. Hal soundly disapproved, and West's departure caused a rift that took years to repair.

"My dad had a real prejudice about higher education and never pushed it," he recalls. "But my mother really encouraged me to go to school, and I wanted to go out into the world."

In Colorado, West excelled at biology and got involved in liberal student politics. In grad school at the University of New Mexico, his adviser egged him on to a doctorate. Again West reversed course. Instead, he began wandering. He married in 1958, put in a stint as an artillery officer at Oklahoma's Fort Sill, worked at the New Mexico National Guard, and did seasonal work at Gran Quivira with the National Park Service. He taught school at Santa Fe High, first history and later biology, finally realizing, "I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life dissecting frogs." By 1964, his destiny suddenly seemed obvious. The path forward was the path back to Hal.

"He and I had been so alienated through the hard times," West says. "I knew I had to get back into the art mode. I realized it was my calling."

His father had left Mildred by then, entrusting the homestead to her and the children. Hal had survived the tumor, but, somewhere in the midst of the hard times, his prairie spirit died.

No longer able to drive or climb scaffolds, he moved to Canyon Road, spending the rest of his life painting and running a small gallery.

West's reunion with Hal took place there. He visited regularly, built frames for Hal's paintings, even taught him etching. He also decided to finally study with Schooley at Highlands. After three summers of making A's, West was invited to enter the graduate program. There, Schooley suddenly downgraded him to a C.

"Elmer was into abstract expressionism as the art god of the times," he says. "He tried very hard to get me out of being a storyteller." Dejected, West left the program. Three years later, while West was running the art department at Santa Fe Preparatory School, Schooley persuaded him to return.

More tumult followed. Hal died in the late sixties. West's marriage, which had produced three children, ended in the early seventies. "It made all the difference in the world that I continued to be a painter," he says. To support his creativity, he and an artist friend partnered in building custom homes, reserving winters for making art. With a new romance in New York, West spent three of those winters making prints and etchings with international artists at the workshop of

African-American artist Robert Blackburn. His artistic course was turning.

"I started doing some really serious dreaming," he says. He dreamed of his childhood, his family, his New Mexico home. He looked down on the landscape from above, often flying with his brother Archie at his side. He saw his mother with a rooster, saw his sickly father lying beside him in bed. Rattlers writhed beneath his bedcovers, ravens circled the house, and West's own brain, cinched in barbed wire, hurtled across the New Mexico sky. The dreams laid bare the psychic terrain that held the story of his life.

"I just couldn't pull myself away from the prairie," he says. "I had kids, I had land, I had history here. What else was there?"

There was painting. In New York, West began dabbling in dream-inspired imagery. When the romance ended, he returned to Santa Fe, where a Jungian therapist taught him to tap into his tangled subconscious. He confronted hidden childhood fears and anxieties. "Wondering how things had happened was a little mystical," he says. "I saw the poetry in it." Meeting photographer Meridel Rubenstein in the late 1970s, he followed her to Boulder, Colorado. While she taught photography, he translated his dreams to canvas.

At an East Side Santa Fe gallery in 1982, West debuted *Prairie Night*, an installation of 26 detailed, deeply felt paintings in saturated hues. For theatrical effect, he constructed an environment that immersed viewers in a sleepy blue night sky. The gallery was perfumed with sagebrush and other desert scents. A soundtrack carried the echo of barking dogs, chirping birds, mooing cows, flowing water, Indian chants, children singing, a family laughing. Rabbit tracks traversed the floor, boldly imprinting West's modern magical realism upon the elite ground of the contemporary art world.

West was 49. He had come to art on his own time and on his own terms, intentionally sidestepping Southwestern art clichés and cliques. *Prairie Night* was a kind of visual denouement, a creative completion to his life with Hal. It was also the beginning of a new expression and new opportunities in art and life.

"It disturbed so many people, but it informed the rest of my painting," West says. "It made me more determined than ever to do deeply psychological paintings of the West that I know and the people I love. Exploring the human condition, the emotional content of life—that's where the story is. There is honesty in that."

Here is the warm summer day when I first saw the green sweet vega, with grama grass waving and water gurgling, with butterflies alighting on clover—and yes, where do we go from here?

So wrote West in *Jerry West: The Alchemy of Memory*, about his 1981 painting *The Prairie World—My Coney Island of the Mind*. In the work, a hunter returning with a fresh catch looks down upon his cherished homestead, whose once open rangelands are now ringed by power poles, ramshackle trailers, and mobile homes. West's 2009 *Intricate Shuffle of God's Living Creatures* plays out a similar theme with an in-your-face image of a giant foot that is close to crushing a horned toad, one of many precious prairie



COURTESY MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO PRESS, JERRY WEST: THE ALCHEMY OF MEMORY

Jerry West cheers the completion of a 1983 billboard with brother Archie West (in hat) in a studio at the old railroad roundhouse in Las Vegas, New Mexico.

creatures that have nearly gone extinct since West's childhood.

"I've seen it my whole life. I've seen the development and the drift of this world I am so attached to," he says. "These paintings are about the psychic pain of seeing it change."

As the landscape around him has changed, West's commitment to painting an honest story of his homeland has grown stronger. Through the years, he and his paintbrush have frequently wandered away from his autobiographical prairie pictures to paint other New Mexican people and places. More than two decades working in a studio on the outskirts of Las Vegas, fueled celebratory reflections on small-town life. His reverence for the great Mexican muralists Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros, as well as murals Hal painted in a Plaza grocery, inspired a longtime record of public art. From northern New Mexico senior centers, the New Mexico State Penitentiary, and the Navajo reservation to a mural of Santa Fe's multicul-

tural history at City Hall, West's public art projects promote dialogues among the state's diverse cultures. His home-building projects and friendships with artists and other working-class heroes keep him engaged in communities all across the state.

In 2013, after a yearlong gig at the Roswell Artist in Residence Program (see "Artful Lodgers," [nmmagazine.com/us/RAIR](http://nmmagazine.com/us/RAIR)), West returned to his prairie studio, where he continues to paint the story of his life—ultimately, he says, the story of all our lives. "My painting is about the interconnectedness of the world," he says. "We all have dreams and stories to tell."

With every brushstroke, West honors his parents and the place they staked for him. He still sees them in his dreams. He follows them back to the homestead, where the windmill still turns, and the fire still burns.

"Where do we go from here?" he asks. "We don't go anywhere. We just go right on." ■

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



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