Incoming Pre-AP English II
Required Summer Reading
Carnegie Vanguard High School

All CVHS students entering Pre-AP English II are required to read *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya and take notes according to the instructions outlined below. Students are expected to read **carefully** and **reflectively,** focusing not merely on the plot, but on the author's choices in terms of developing characters, conflicts, symbols, metaphors, and other literary elements.

During the first weeks of school, students will:

- use their notes to compose an in-class essay (students will choose from a menu of prompts), and
- take a test over the novel.

Students who are recent enrollees at CVHS will be given a grace period to complete the assignment; all students who attended CVHS in the spring must have the reading and the notes completed upon arrival for the first day of class.

Instructions for Notetaking

As you read the novel, take careful notes related to the topics listed below. Your notes must follow the novel chronologically. Notes may be handwritten or typed.

- Each entry in your notes will begin with the chapter and page number of the passage about which you are creating notes.
- Each note must be thorough enough so that when you return to your notes later, what you have written will be sufficient to recall the connection you found between the text and the ideas listed below.
- Notes must be created for each chapter.
- You yourself must be the creator of your notes—plagiarism and the use of AI to create notes are strictly prohibited.

The notes that you create must relate to the ideas listed below.

- Mental and/or psychological changes in characters, possibly in terms of awakenings, discoveries, or changes in consciousness.
- Colliding cultures, including national, regional, religious, or institutional.
- Childhood and adolescence as a time of not only innocence and wonder, but also tribulation and terror.
- Psychological or moral traits shaped by one's surroundings (cultural, physical, or geographical).
- Bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel)—the psychological or moral development of the protagonist from youth to maturity, when this character recognizes his or her place in the world.
- Characters pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences.
- Contrasting places (for example, two countries, two cities or towns, two houses, or the land and the sea) that represent opposed forces or ideas in the novel.
- Scenes of violence, not for violence's sake, but for what they contribute to the meaning of the novel as a whole.

Introduction to *Bless Me, Ultima*

Full of "sensual dreams [and] unexplained phenomena," this "best-known and most-respected" coming-of-age classic from the godfather of Chicano literature follows a young boy growing up in the llano, or plains, of post-World War II New Mexico, and the generous curandera who introduces him to the sacred side of life (*New York Times*).

"I pulled this baby into the light of life . . . Only I will know his destiny."

Antonio Marez is six years old when the woman who helped usher him into the world comes to stay with his family in New Mexico. Venerated by some as a miracle-worker—and disparaged by others as a bruja—Ultima, a curandera, or healer, opens Tony's eyes to the spiritual roots of his culture, and introduces him to a magical, if sometimes frightening, new world: a realm in which she operates as a shaman.

Suddenly, the ordinary challenges and triumphs of childhood become extraordinary. As Ultima shows Tony how to cure ailments, reverse curses, and restore peace to those who have lost it, he embarks on a singular quest, one in which he probes the family ties that bind and rend him, questions the Catholicism that shaped him, and explores the Spanish, Mexican, and Native American influences that informed not only his heritage, but his very sense of self. And at each life turn there is Ultima, who was there the day he was born . . . and will nurture the birth of his soul.

A rich and wondrous story that reveals universal truths about the human condition and celebrates the beauty of Chicano culture. (barnesandnoble.com)

What Is Magical Realism?

Originating in Latin America, magical realism combines elements of fantasy fiction with mundane details of reality. What makes it magical realism and not fantasy fiction is that reality is imposed upon the fantasy, not the other way around. There's an intentional lack of explanation in magical realism about why the magic exists, it has less of a traditional plot structure, and it uses magical elements as more of a continuous metaphor. But more than that, magical realism does more than simply imbue stories with elements of fantasy—much of magical realism is about folklore, mythology, and fairy tales.

In fact, magical realism is a closer relative to literary fiction than fantasy—which helps in identifying it in the books we read. Series like *The Lord of the Rings*, The *Kingkiller Chronicle*, and even *Percy Jackson*, are fantasy fiction for myriad reasons, but a simple way to differentiate fantasy from magical realism comes from Gotham Writers: "Magical realism situates readers in a predominantly realistic world, fantasy takes place in an unreal world with unreal characters." (https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/what-is-magical-realism)

Accessing *Bless Me, Ultima*

Bless Me, Ultima is widely available at libraries and bookstores. In addition, Free Books Mania offers a free download from the following url: https://freebooksmania.com/2021/03/bless-me-ultima-pdf.html

NEA BIG READ

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Bless Me, Ultima

by Rudolfo Anaya

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Preface

Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima is about pride and assimilation, faith and doubt. The summer before Antonio Juan Márez y Luna turns seven, an old woman with healing powers comes to live with his family. There is something magical and mystical about Anaya's coming-of-age story in post-World War II New Mexico. The novel presents a world where everyday life is still full of dreams, legends, prayers, and folkways.

"A novel is not written to explain a culture, it creates its own."

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.

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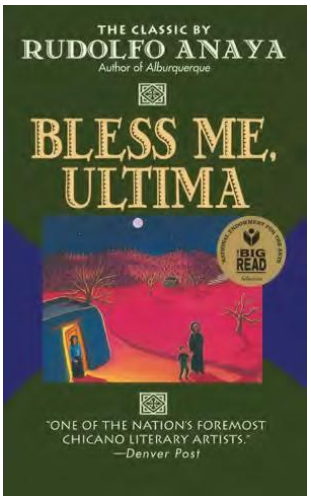
About the Book

Introduction to the Book



The summer before Antonio Juan Márez y Luna turns seven years old, an old woman comes to live with his family in Guadalupe, New Mexico. This woman—called La Grande or Ultima—is a curandera, a traditional healer feared by many and mysterious to all. With her knowledge of medicinal plants and adoration for the llano (open plains), she uses her magic to aid the community.

Because she served as his midwife, Ultima has a special connection to Antonio. As she teaches him, their bond deepens. Antonio witnesses several tragic events that profoundly shake his understanding of his history and his future. After the murder of Lupito, a soldier recently returned from World War II, Antonio begins to consider sin, death, and the afterlife in earnest.

Among the many conflicts Antonio seeks to resolve, the tension between his parents ranks foremost. A devout Catholic, María Luna Márez is the daughter of farmers, and she desperately wants Antonio to become a priest. But his father, Gabriel Márez, is a former vaquero, or cowboy, whose wandering spirit has not settled despite marriage and six children. Gabriel's deepest dream has not come true—to move his family to California's vineyard country.

Antonio's dreams often foreshadow the future and feature his three older brothers, just demobilized from World War II. These surreal dreams also reflect his existential questions: Why is there evil in the world? Why does God sometimes seem to punish the good? Where will I go after death? How can I know the truth? Believing that his first Communion will answer these questions, Antonio studies his catechism and proves an able scholar. Through his dreams and his challenges—including a mob beating from his schoolmates, the death of a close friend, and his brothers' waywardness—Ultima and her owl remain a watchful, benevolent presence.

Bless Me, Ultima is a coming-of-age novel about a young boy's loss of innocence and approach to maturity. But it also deals with tradition and education, faith and doubt, and good and evil. And if Antonio doesn't find an absolute truth in his search, he still comes to believe with his father that "sometimes it takes a lifetime to acquire understanding, because in the end understanding simply means having a sympathy for people."

Major Characters in the Book

Antonio Juan Márez y Luna
The novel's narrator is an imaginative boy about to turn seven years old. Torn between the Mexican-Catholic heritage and the daily miracles of the natural world, he struggles to gain maturity and reconcile all the different blessings envisioned for him. Antonio's Family

Gabriel Márez
Antonio's father is a former vaquero (cowboy) who dreams of moving his family to California.

María Luna Márez
Antonio's mother is a devout Catholic from a family of farmers who wants her youngest son, Antonio, to bring honor to the family by becoming a priest.

León, Eugene, and Andrew
Antonio's older brothers have been fighting in World War II. Their return to New Mexico renews Gabriel's dream of a new life.

Antonio's Circle

Ultima
Also known as La Grande, the elderly curandera (healer) joins the Márez family during her final days. Many in the town believe she is a bruja (witch), but she uses her herbal cures for good.

Samuel and Cico
Although they are only two years older than Antonio, Samuel and Cico serve as wise mentors. Samuel tells Antonio the legend of the Golden Carp the day Antonio finishes first grade; Cico takes Antonio to see the magical fish the next summer.

Horse, Bones, Red, the Vitamin Kid, and Abel This gang comprises the boys with whom Antonio plays, fights, and ultimately falls out.

Tenorio
The villain of the novel blames Ultima for the deaths of his two young daughters. When he vows revenge and attempts to kill Ultima, Ultima's owl blinds him in one eye.

Narciso
The town drunk and a gifted gardener, he bravely tries to stop Tenorio from murdering Ultima. After Antonio witnesses Tenorio's triumph over Narciso under the juniper tree, Antonio's doubts about God deepen.

How Bless Me, Ultima Came to Be Written

"When I started writing Bless Me, Ultima, I was writing Antonio's story. This boy grows up in a small town, like my hometown, and deals with things that I did—fishing, school, church, and listening to the stories of the people from the community. One night when I was writing late at night, Ultima appeared to me—let me put it that way. She stood at the door and she asked me what I was doing, and I said I was writing a story. And she said that she had to be in the story. And when I asked her name she said, 'Ultima.' And that's when the novel came alive."

—Excerpted from Rudolfo Anaya's interview with Dan Stone

Miracles and Magic in Bless Me, Ultima

No one in Bless Me, Ultima doubts the existence of mystery and magic. Miracles, signs, and symbols form a rich part of the New Mexican Catholic culture of Anaya's world, a unique setting where, for four-hundred years, Catholicism has thrived alongside Indian Pueblo religions. Much of Antonio's struggle stems from his desire to understand the "correct" source of these miracles: the Catholic church, or the curandera.

Catholicism offers Antonio a prescribed way of seeing the world. He diligently learns his Catechism, believing that revelation will come once the body of Christ enters him during his first Communion (Eucharist). He loves the Virgin of Guadalupe—the patron saint of his small New Mexican town— because she represents forgiveness. A devout Catholic woman, Antonio's mother María pushes him toward the priesthood.

Ultima never contradicts María, but her ways as a traditional healer are different. As Antonio says, "Ultima was a curandera, a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick.... And because a curandera had this power she was misunderstood and often suspected of practicing witchcraft herself."

These two perspectives—the church and the curandera—are often in conflict in the novel. Catholicism praises the Virgin Mary, yet she is mocked in Antonio's school Christmas play. The town denigrates Ultima as a bruja (witch), but when the priest cannot heal, some townspeople beg her to use her power.

Ultima tells Antonio not what to believe, but how to make choices. Like his father, she wants Antonio to think for himself. By the end of the novel, as Rudolfo Anaya has said, "Antonio looks into nature deep enough to see that God is in nature, not just the church."

Legends in Bless Me, Ultima

The Weeping Woman

The origin of the legend of La Llorona (the Weeping Woman) has been part of Southwestern culture since the days of the conquistadors. Tales vary, but all report that this beautiful, frightening spirit—with long black hair and a white gown—belongs to a cursed mother searching rivers and lakes for her children, whom she has drowned. Parents have used this story to teach their children, telling them the merciless La Llorona would drag them to a watery grave if they stay out late at night. In Bless Me, Ultima, Antonio has a terrible nightmare: "It is la llorona, my brothers cried in fear, the old witch who cries along the river banks and seeks the blood of boys and men to drink!"

The Legend of the Golden Carp

Anaya created this story, which draws from Christian, Aztec, and Pueblo mythology. The young Antonio first hears about the carp from his friends Samuel and Cico. Similar to the Old Testament's Noah and the flood, the tale warns that unless the people stop sinning, the carp will cause a flood to purge their evil. Antonio believes the story, but he cannot reconcile it with his Catholicism. After first hearing it, he says that "the roots of everything I had ever believed in seemed shaken." Later, when he sees the carp, he is dazzled by its beauty and wonders if a new religion can blend both the Golden Carp and Catholicism.

Herbal Remedies in Bless Me, Ultima

"For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit."

Juniper

A small shrub that grows 4-6 feet high in the Southwest, juniper is used to cure headaches, influenza, nausea, and spider bites. Indians also burned juniper wood for feasting and ceremonial fires.

"Place many juniper branches on the platform... Have Antonio cut them, he understands the power in the tree."

Yerba del manso

Manso can be translated to mean calm or quiet. This herb can cure burns, colic in babies, and even rheumatism.

"Of all the plants we gathered none was endowed with so much magic as the yerba del manso."

Oregano

This herb is also used to heal sore throats and bronchitis.

"We gathered plenty because this was not only a cure for coughs and fever but a spice my mother used for beans and meat."

Oshá

Sometimes regarded as a good-luck charm, this herb grows best in the mountains of New Mexico and Colorado. Along with its healing power, it can keep poisonous snakes away.

"It is like la yerba del manso, a cure for everything."

About the Author

Rudolfo Anaya (b. 1937)

Rudolfo Anaya, 1992 (Copyright Marion Ettlinger)

Rudolfo Anaya was born in the small village of Pastura, near Santa Rosa, New Mexico, to a farmgirl mother and a cowboy father. The curandera who presided at his birth set out tools of both family trades near the newborn-only to see him reach for a paper and pencil instead.

To judge from his early years, one might have expected him to crawl toward a sportinggoods store. As a boy Anaya hunted and fished and swam the Pecos River. Later, after the family left the countryside for Albuquerque, he gravitated toward baseball and football. At sixteen, while roughhousing around an irrigation channel with friends, Anaya dove in and hit the bottom. Years of arduous rehabilitation and bedridden reading would pass before he regained a full movement in his neck.

Anaya discovered a different kind of movement during his years at the University of New Mexico. El Movimiento, the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, encouraged Anaya's dream of writing books that would explore his cultural heritage.

After graduating with his BA and MA, he taught at middle schools, high schools, and universities while writing at night. In 1966, he married Patricia Lawless, who shared his passion for books and storytelling.

After more than seven years of writing and rewriting his novel, Anaya submitted his first manuscript, Bless Me, Ultima, to the small Berkeley press, Quinto Sol. A $1,000 prize accompanied the novel's printing, and the mainstream New York publisher Warner Books later acquired its rights. Since its publication in 1972, the novel has become part of high school English and university Chicano literature classes. Writer Tony Hillerman has praised Anaya as the "godfather and guru of Chicano literature."

An Interview with Rudolfo Anaya

On January 4, 2007, Dan Stone of the National Endowment for the Arts, interviewed Rudolfo Anaya at his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. An excerpt from their conversation follows.

Dan Stone: Did you grow up in a bilingual household like Antonio Márez in Bless Me, Ultima?

Rudolfo Anaya: My parents spoke only Spanish. My dad worked for big ranchers and he could buy and sell cattle, which meant he could get along in English. But at home it was a complete Spanish-speaking household. By the time I went to school when I was six or seven, I didn't know English, I only knew Spanish. When I look back, I think that we must have had wonderful teachers who, instead of alienating us, allowed us to make a transition into that English-speaking world.

DS: Would you describe some of the autobiographical aspects in your novel?

RA: Bless Me, Ultima is autobiographical in the sense that I use my hometown, the Pecos River, Highway 66, the church, the school, the little villages and ranches around the town. My parents were very much like Antonio's parents. My mother grew up in a farming family in Porta de Luna. My father grew up on the llano as a vaquero, as a cowboy, so as a child, I saw the tensions that a conflicting way of life created.

DS: It's a potent internal conflict.

RA: Antonio's ambivalence also has to deal with the conflict that the parents seem to impose on him. The mother says, "Our way of life is changing. You've got to have an education." And one way to get that education would be to become a priest. And the father says, "I'm not too religious, I want him to be like me, a cowboy, a vaquero." And that way of life also was dying in the 1940s and '50s, so Antonio has that big internal conflict that has to do with family roots.

DS: When did you become interested in reading and writing, and how did that develop as you moved on to the university?

RA: Becoming a writer is an evolutionary process. I had had a very serious spinal cord injury accident when I was in high school, and that also figures a great deal into my life. Somehow that time of being in the hospital and dealing with recovery and seeing other kids my age really suffering a lot, seeing death, and then coming out of that experience, was very important and informative. That's one of the experiences that told me that I have to write, to record not only what happened to me, but what happened to people around me.

DS: Was it difficult to develop your own voice and break away from what you had been taught at the University of New Mexico?

RA: Yes. I started at the university in 1958 and at that time there were very few Chicano students on campus, and very few in the English department studying English literature. So, I was very much alone for a long period of time. It was a struggle. My companion was a dictionary, and I spent hours and hours in the library reading and doing research. And I had some very good professors. There were not any Chicano professors, but there were very good teachers. They were guides, and they helped me along.

DS: Did you know a curandera when you were young?

RA: When I was growing up, the curanderas were people who helped when there was a baby to be delivered, or maybe somebody broke an arm and fell off a horse, or couldn't get to a doctor. In Bless Me, Ultima, I took that very real world of women who are healers, or curanderas, but I moved it a little bit into witchcraft to set up the conflict between good and evil.

DS: For whom do you write, and why?

RA: I think the answer is, I write because I must. Then the whole idea of community comes into mind. Yes, I write for my New Mexican community, the Spanish-speaking world, but also for the entire world. Sometimes I'll be writing and I'll think of a person, a family member, or sometimes of a critic, and I'll say, "This is for them."

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Rudolfo Anaya

1930s

- 1932: Franklin Delano Roosevelt elected U.S. president.
- 1937: Rudolfo Anaya born October 30 in Pastura, New Mexico.

1940s

- 1941: Japanese forces bomb Pearl Harbor; America enters World War II.
- Anaya's brothers fight in World War II.
- 1945: Scientists test the atomic bomb in New Mexico, which the U.S. then drops over Japan, ending World War II.

1950s

- 1953: Dwight D. Eisenhower inaugurated U.S. president, cementing a period of economic prosperity.
- 1953: Anaya becomes temporarily paralyzed after a diving accident.

1960s

- 1966: César Chávez organizes a band of striking California fruit pickers, leading to a five-year grape boycott.
- Anaya graduates from the University of New Mexico with a BA in English in 1963, and marries Patricia Lawless in 1966.

1970s

- 1970: Rally in Los Angeles protests high Latino casualties in Vietnam War; three killed, including Los Angeles Times reporter Ruben Salazar.
- 1972: Anaya's first novel, Bless Me, Ultima, is published.
- 1979: Anaya receives an NEA Literature Fellowship.

1980s

- 1986: Immigration Reform and Control Act institutes sanctions for hiring the undocumented, strengthens border patrol enforcement.
- Anaya travels to China in 1984, and later publishes his travel journal, A Chicano in China in 1986

1990s

- 1993: César Chávez dies.
- 1995: Anaya releases Zia Summer, his first Sonny Baca mystery.

2000s

- 2000: Anaya's book-length poem Elegy on the Death of César Chávez is published.
- 2001: Anaya receives the National Medal of Arts.
- 2002: Pope John Paul II canonizes Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin as the first Indian saint of the Americas.
- 2010: Anaya's wife, Patricia, dies in January.

The Virgin of Guadalupe (Patron Saint of Mexico)

Twelve years after Spanish explorers landed on Mexican soil, the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe occurred. In 1531, the dark-skinned mother of Jesus appeared several times to a peasant Indian man named Juan Diego, a Catholic convert. She asked to have a church built on the site. After Diego told a bishop what happened—only to be turned away—a colorful image of the Virgin was emblazoned on Diego's cloak to validate his story. This miracle led to the conversion of about nine million of Mexico's Indians to Catholicism. The Vatican recognized this miracle in 1745, and the image now hangs above the altar in the Basílica de Santa María de Guadalupe in Mexico City.

Anaya's New Mexico

Like his protagonist Antonio Márez in Bless Me, Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya grew up in New Mexico under the shadow of World War II, which his brothers fought overseas. As a young boy in 1945, he would not have realized that, less than a day's ride away on horseback, government scientists in Los Alamos, New Mexico, had manufactured the atomic bomb that would bring the war in the Pacific to its horrific end.

Rural New Mexico in the mid-twentieth century had long been a land of Mexican and Native American tradition both lured by, and resistant to, civilization's advances. Hopi, Navajo, and Pueblo Indians had foraged and farmed there for centuries. When the Spanish arrived in 1540, they were newcomers. But the religion they believed, the laws they imposed, and the language they brought all took root.

The Rio Grande corridor is the bedrock of the Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache Indians, a spiritual setting that informs Anaya's fiction. As Anaya has said, "Into that came the Spaniards and the Mexicans with the Catholic religion; later, Anglo America comes in. So you have a fascinating place where these cultures are mixing, learning from each other, and quite often in conflict." The body of Spanish and Mexican folklore, called cuentos, passed orally from generation to generation, contains the basis of New Mexican values and beliefs. Through Ultima and Antonio, Anaya has created his own story that is as much old as new.

Other Works/Adaptations

Anaya and His Other Works

Rudolfo Anaya's books since Bless Me, Ultima (1972) fall into roughly three approximate categories: the novels, stories, essays, poetry, and plays he writes for his grandchildren; and the anthologies that he's edited out of a sense of responsibility to his peers and inheritors. After the success of his first novel, Anaya wrote Heart of Aztlan (1976), the personal and political novel of a boy whose family moves from the New Mexico countryside to the barrio. Rounding out his semi-autobiographical trilogy is the novel Tortuga (1979), which reimagines the months Anaya spent in a hospital recuperating from a near-fatal teenage diving accident. Some critics, including Anaya himself, consider Tortuga his best book.

With the trilogy behind him, Anaya turned his hand to several other genres. A Chicano in China (1986) narrates Anaya's travels in the Far East. The Legend of La Llorona (1984) and Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcóatl (1987) retell the myths of the "weeping woman" of the Southwest and the winged dragon of Mexico. The Farolitos of Christmas: A New Mexico Christmas Story (1987) was Anaya's first children's story, preserving a vignette he invented for his granddaughter.

Just when Anaya might have settled prematurely into the role of Chicano elder statesman, in 1992 he published the novel Alburquerque, which became an important transitional book for him. His first fully realized, adult story of the urban West, Alburquerque reclaimed the original spelling of his adopted hometown for a story that combined many of the forms he had already used and added an important new one: detective fiction.

The book won the prestigious PEN/West Award, and paved the way for Anaya's quartet of Sonny Baca mysteries. Grouped around the seasons that governed Anaya's childhood on his family's farm, these novels of a shamus gradually turning shaman—Zia Summer (1995), Rio Grande Fall (1996),
Shaman Winter (1999), and Jemez Spring (2005)—brought Anaya a largely new audience.

In 2000, Anaya undertook another book-length poem, this one destined for young readers. Elegy on the Death of César Chávez (2000) commemorated the travails and triumphs of the great United Farm Workers founder. The Chicano movement in which both men had played an important part was passing into history, and Anaya took pains to ensure that Chávez's accomplishments were not forgotten by the younger generation whose relative freedom he had helped to make possible. The struggle remained far from over, so Anaya's elegy struck a balance between honoring his own aging generation and rousing the next one.

Yet Anaya was hardly finished. In 2006, he published two new books: a collection of short fiction, The Man Who Could Fly and Other Stories, and Curse of the ChupaCabra, his first young-adult novel. Pushing seventy, Anaya was happy to be remembered as the groundbreaking author of Bless Me, Ultima, perhaps even happier as the author of a still-growing shelf of books. As an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, he had searched the Zimmerman Library in vain for a literary tradition to call his own. Today, that same library's Center for Southwest Research has become a mecca for Anaya scholars, housing a wealth of his first editions, international translations, and manuscripts.

Credits

Works Cited

Anaya, Rudolfo A. Interview with Dan Stone for NEA Big Read. 4 January 2007.

Passages from BLESS ME, ULTIMA; BENDÍCEME, ULTIMA.
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Cover image: "Great Horned Owl, Bubo Virginianus Subarcticus, in front of white background" by Eric Isselee. Shutterstock.

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https://www.taosnews.com/news/local-news/bless-me-ultima-a-new-mexico-classic-of-chicanoliterature/article_054f154a-3f4c-51aa-a6ae-2bcb4a0edca9.html

'Bless Me, Ultima,' a New Mexico classic of Chicano literature

By Teresa Dovalpage
For The Taos News
Nov 19, 2018

Courtesy Arenas Entertainment

Miriam Colon as Ultima and Luke Ganalon as Antonio Márez in "Bless Me, Ultima" (2013).

First published in 1972, "Bless Me, Ultima," the beloved coming-of-age novel by Rudolfo Anaya, is now standard reading in Albuquerque Public Schools.

It was the 2010 selection for the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read. It has been turned into an opera by Héctor Armienta, the artistic director of the only Latinofocused opera company in the country. It was also made into a movie starring Benito Martinez, Dolores Heredia, Luke Ganalon and Miriam Colon. More recently, it was named in the **top 100 Great American Reads in a PBS series**.

Told in the voice of Antonio Márez, the story is set in Guadalupe, a rural New Mexican town, around the end of World War II. When Ultima enters Antonio's life, he is still a young boy ready to start school and nervous about being away from his family, particularly his mother, for the first time. Ultima, a curandera who doesn't have any relatives left, comes to live with them, accompanied by her pet owl.

The owl appears often in Antonio's vivid dreams. Though he has heard that owls are *brujas*, witches in disguise, he soon warms up to it and accepts it as part of Ultima's identity. Only at the end the reader learns why Ultima's life is intertwined with her pet's.

The owl is with Antonio, seemingly protecting him, when the boy witnesses Lupito's death. Lupito is a WWII veteran who suffers from what today we would call posttraumatic stress disorder.

The effects of the war on young men is mentioned several times in the novel. When Antonio's brothers return from the battlefield, they are said to have "war-sickness."

Ultima joins the Márez family not only as a guest but also as a protector. That's how she is introduced at the beginning of the novel: "Ultima was a curandera, a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick. And I had heard that Ultima could lift the curses laid by *brujas*, that she could exorcise the evil the witches planted in people to make them sick."

She uses her wisdom to help Antonio in his journey from childhood to maturity. She has been present at his birth and knows what his future holds.

While relatives from his maternal family, los Lunas, would like for Antonio to become a priest, his father wants him to follow in his footsteps as a vaquero, a cowboy. At Antonio's mother's insistence, Ultima finally predicts that the boy will be "a man of learning." But in the end, he must decide for himself. The process toward independence is one of the main themes of the novel.

Though Ultima doesn't try to influence Antonio's decision, she teaches him to love "el llano," the countryside, and tells him about the healing power of herbs. In one of the most beautiful scenes of the book, she takes Antonio for a walk and shares her knowledge with him: "For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug she made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it from its home in the earth." She is particularly happy to find " *yerba del manso,*" which "could cure bums, sores, colic in babies, bleeding, dysentery and even rheumatism."

The Spanish language plays an important part in the story. All the chapter numbers are in Spanish and Spanish phrases appear throughout the book. We can assume that, at least at the beginning, Antonio's mental processes take place in this language: "All of the older people spoke only in Spanish, and I myself understood only Spanish. It was only after one went to school that one learned English."

Cultural conflicts start for Antonio the first day of school when his name becomes "Anthony" and his classmates make fun of his lunch. "My mother had packed a small jar of hot beans and some good, green chile wrapped in tortillas. When the other children saw my lunch, they laughed and pointed again.

Even the high school girl laughed. They showed me their sandwiches that were made of bread. However, Ultima's prophecy of him as a future "man of learning" comes true: he learns English so fast and well that at the end of the year, his teacher, Miss Maestas, promotes him from first to third grade.

Later, Antonio becomes Ultima's helper in one of the scariest episodes: the healing of his uncle Lucas who has been cursed by the Trementina sisters. The sisters are "bad" witches (as opposed to Ultima, who is a "good" one).

But I am not going to tell you the rest of the story. If you haven't read this novel, go to the library or the bookstore and get it right away. I used it as required reading in my *Santería* and *Curanderismo* class, several years ago, and, in the words of one of my students, "It was the best book I've ever read, more magical than Harry Potter and much closer to the New Mexican heart."