

Bless Me, Ultima, by Rudolfo Anaya

The Author

An acclaimed Chicano writer, Rudolfo (1937-present) Anaya has become best known for his award-winning novels, such as *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Tortuga* (1979), and *Albuquerque* (1992). Anaya, who taught at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque for nineteen years before retiring in 1993, has also published epic poems, short stories, nonfiction, plays, and children's books. He has been credited as a leader in the Latino literary community for his ground-breaking style and his success in writing stories that capture the essence of the Chicano experience.

Anaya's father, who came from a family of cattle workers and shearers, was a *vaquero*, a horseman who worked on the ranches surrounding Pastura, and his mother came from a family of poor farmers, who were devoted Catholics. Anaya, who was the fifth of seven children, saw his parents as the two halves of his life — the wildness and uncertainty of the windswept plains of east central New Mexico and the stable domesticity of farm life. Soon after he was born Anaya's family moved to Santa Rosa, New Mexico, where Anaya spent the next fourteen years. Later, his writings would be filled with images and memories of the people who affected his childhood. His fiction draws heavily on the superstitions and myths of the Mexican-American culture that commingled with the traditions of the Roman Catholic faith. In the community's rich storytelling tradition, legend and history were blended together to create stories filled with mystery and revelation.

Rudolfo Anaya says. . .

"I believe that every writer needs a guide, because writing is an exploration and it is not only an exploration for me it's for the reader."

"It is because good is always stronger than evil. Always remember that, Antonio. The smallest bit of good can stand against all the powers of evil in the world and it will emerge triumphant."

The Work

Antonio Marez is six years old when Ultima enters his life. She is a curandera, one who heals with herbs and magic. 'We cannot let her live her last days in loneliness,' says Antonio's mother. 'It is not the way of our people,' agrees his father. And so Ultima comes to live with Antonio's family in New Mexico. Soon Tony will journey to the threshold of manhood. Always, Ultima watches over him. She graces him with the courage to face childhood bigotry, diabolical possession, the moral collapse of his brother, and too many violent deaths. Under her wise guidance, Tony will probe the family ties that bind him, and he will find in himself the magical secrets of the pagan past—a mythic legacy equally as palpable as the Catholicism of Latin America in which he has been schooled. At each turn in his life there is Ultima who will nurture the birth of his soul

The Questions

1. What does this novel seem to suggest or say about America?
2. *Bless Me, Ultima* is a coming-of-age story that chronicles several rites of passage for Antonio. Which aspects of his development are universal, and which are particular to his Hispanic Catholic culture?
3. Why does the Márez family ask Ultima to live with them? Why does she think Antonio is special? Despite the conflicts between his parents and the skepticism of their neighbors, why is the family's view of Ultima the one thing upon which they can agree?
4. The novel's action begins near the close of World War II, before Antonio's three soldier-brothers return safely home to New Mexico. How important is the war to the story?
5. What do Antonio's dreams reveal about him? How do they change as he matures?
6. The humor in the novel usually comes from moments when the boys are playing or fighting together. What significance is there to the Christmas play, in which Horse plays the Virgin Mary and Antonio plays a shepherd?
7. Often the boys' games lead to violence that parallels the adult world. What happens when they force Antonio to become their priest?
8. How does the legend of the Golden Carp resemble the New Testament story of Jesus Christ, or the Mexican story of the Virgin of Guadalupe?
9. What happens when Antonio finally takes his long-awaited first Communion?
10. Antonio witnesses the deaths of several adults and one of his childhood friends. How does the latter death, especially, affect his sense of the world?
11. At the end of the novel, a radical thought comes to eight-year-old Antonio: Is a new religion possible? What do you think is the answer to his question?
12. How would you answer Antonio's final question: "What dream would form to guide my life as a man?" Does he choose the life of a farmer, *vaquero*, priest, or something else?
13. In your experience, does the novel reinforce or revise stereotypes of Hispanic culture?