

INTERVIEW WITH RUDOLFO ANAYA

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Rudolfo Anaya, known as the poet of the llano and father of Chicano storytelling in English, is one of the founders of the canon of contemporary Chicano literary movement. He is among the first winners of the Quinto Sol Prize and his writings, particularly his opera prima, *Bless Me, Ultima*, have generated a great deal of substantive critical response. His contribution to the ever-increasing body of Chicano literature, both as writer, critic, and more recently patron, is key to the evolving development of the Chicano identity and its cultural revitalization.

CARMEN FLYS: Mr. Anaya, what inspires your writing, what starts you off. Is it an idea, an image?

RUDOLFO ANAYA: For me it's always been the visitation of characters. Since I was very young I've thought there is a natural creative spirit, a very romantic spirit, that we have within. That spirit seeks expression. It exists in those of us who want to be writers, or think that we are going to be writers; who want to write poetry, to write stories, to jump into novels. But that spirit, that energy, has to be channeled. I think a great deal of channeling for me has to do with the very strong characters that come to me and demand that their stories be told.

C.F.: Like *Última*. She is unforgettable.

R.A.: She is unforgettable because, it's as if she tapped into my creative spirit and told me "write my story." And that, in fact, is the way I have sometimes explained *Bless Me Ultima*, by saying one night *Ultima* came to visit me. In that visitation, she told me who she was and therefore the story began to flow with its natural rhythm.

C.F.: Speaking of characters, would you say that some of your other characters are to a large or small degree autobiographical?

R.A.: I think that my early novels certainly contained a great deal of autobiographical material, and drawing in of characters from my childhood. I identify in *Bless Me Ultima* with Antonio, in *Heart of Aztlan* with Jason, in *Tortuga* with Tortuga. I had been in a hospital like Tortuga. I had been in the body cast, I had become the Turtleman and I had to work my way back to being a man. All of that material is autobiographical. By the time I write *Albuquerque*, I am identifying with Ben Chávez, the writer and narrator of the story. But even in my current work, I identify with Sonny Baca, the private investigator in *Zia Summer*. It's a profession that I've never been in, that I know very little about, but he's still...Let me put it this way, writing is a way for a writer to give his personal "journey through life" to the character. And so the character reflects the author.

C.F.: This way of interconnecting your novels, very loosely, with different characters that keep appearing, are you forming your own barrio and community? In the manner that William Kennedy, Faulkner, and others have?

R.A.: I think I already have. It's what I call the Nuevo Mexicano community. It starts in the very small hispano village of Nuevo México in *Bless Me Ultima*, it moves into a barrio in *Heart of Aztlan*, then a hospital, an existential space, in *Tortuga*. It moves back to Albuquerque which is the biggest metropolitan city in the state. But my work reflects the state. My characters go to Córdova in northern New Mexico, they go back to Santa Rosa,

where I grew up. They go down to Socorro where Sonny Baca's roots are. And so writing is a way of composing the Nuevo Mexicano community and identity.

C.F.: So, in a way, could we see your work as one long continuum, as a buldingsroman of the community, or a romance quest in search of that Nuevo Mexicano identity? Different stages of life, migration from rural to urban environment...

R.A.: In and as far as I reflect the historical time that I have lived in, I think that is very true. Isn't my life in a sense, a very Nuevo Mexicano life, coming from the small villages, the ranchos, the agricultural community and then coming into the shock and conflict with the Anglo-American world that now is the mainstream culture in this state? And all that that means in terms of personal identity and conflict with a social and political reality. It also means not only being able to compose characters from our community, but also being able to write about anglo characters, which happens in *Albuquerque* and in *Zia Summer*. There is a natural historical evolution my writing traces.

But as important as that may be, I think the most important element of my work is one of a spiritual nature. And that is going to the roots of not only a Nuevo Mexicano identity that has to do not only with the surface of how we live, but with the depth of how we live. What is it that our ancestors have given to us which has been here in Nuevo México for as long as there have been Españoles and Mexicanos and Indios-Native Americans? Drawing from those traditions, if you will, and exploring their profound spiritual levels is what my work is all about.

C.F.: Do you think all the myths, legends and traditions of the different cultural heritages are very much alive in the people today? Or are they being forgotten?

R.A.: Both. I think there are elements in Nuevo México, whether they be at the Indian Pueblo or at the Hispano Pueblo, where the people are still in touch with the continuous history. Especially in the Indian pueblo because there, their continuous history dates back thousands of years. In a sense, each one of us is in touch with that history. We are composed of the elements of that history, of that mythology and of that oral tradition.

C.F.: But many people don't know that. They don't know the history or the mythology.

R.A.: Maybe the one thing the writer does, is to remind them. I mean that is why I read, to be reminded of things that perhaps I have yet to discover.

C.F.: You see that as your role as a writer is to remind others?

R.A.: Very much so. I realize that what I do is a personal interpretation and therefore it's an opinion, and therefore it's my universe that I am putting together. But the people who read me, tell me that I am pushing the right buttons so far. They can relate to those hidden elements that I keep bringing up in my fiction.

C.F.: Are there any particular elements of your complex cultural heritage, Spanish, Mexican, Native American, and Anglo, that are particularly more relevant to you or to the community at this point?

R.A.: You prefaced your question by calling us a complex culture. I think that is very true. We have raices in the Mexicano, Español, and the Indian Pueblo world of the Rio Grande. We also have raices, as Sonny Baca says, that stretch back, beyond Spain, into the Mediterranean. At one point he says that the Río Grande of Nuevo México is like the Nile of Egypt. Here is where people have come to settle, to raise their families, to raise their crops, and to, in a sense, create a Parthenon of their gods. To explain that in one short answer is impossible. Because what we have is a history of each particular group, a language, a way of relating to the community, the family, and the village. How we relate to the vecino, and to the earth is very strong in the Nuevo Mexicano. Our history also teaches us a way of relating to the cosmos. And all of those relationships have levels of meaning. Each one is important,

whether one level of meaning simply be the fact that someone is your compadre or comadre. Or that your spiritual view is partly Catholic religion and partly Pueblo Indian world. I have a novel coming out in February, in the spring, a short novella about a man who returns to his city after 30 years of exile. He is a prophet and will share his philosophy with the people. That will be an extended answer to your question. [the reference is to the novel *Jalamanta* which came out in February, 1996]

C.F.: You have spoken and written very much on the importance of the landscape in your writing. That is something that interests me particularly. Your works seem to show open spaces but in a very rooted sense, not confining yet not uprooted. And you speak of the force of "la tierra." Is it the same with the cityscape? Are urban migrations causing people to lose their center?

R.A.: I think in *Zia Summer* this loss of harmony is very clear. In a sense, Sonny Baca suffers from it. He's grown up in the city, he has a university degree, but he has lost touch with the traditions and values of his own community. But even within the urban setting, there are people who remind him of who he is and where he came from. In this case his vecino, Don Eliseo, and his girlfriend, Rita, are very instrumental in giving his history back to him.

C.F.: So you feel that with this tremendous urban migration there is a risk of losing our center, if we aren't reminded?

R.A.: There is a tremendous risk of losing that center of our identity that we once knew so well. I think we worry about it. We see for example the restless young people that are turning to crime, or to drugs and searching in a kind of mainstream culture- in a mainstream river-for answers. Yet knowing that not all of the answers are there. Some are, but I guess to put it simply, the Nuevo Mexicano is going through a tremendous transition and many people are asking the same question. Will we lose that continuous history that has for so long given us our identity?

C.F.: I wanted to ask you about your imagined space versus a strict reality. Sandia Mountains, Tortuga Mountain, real or imagined? One thing is the observed landscape as it is, and the other imaginative landscape. Which is more real to you? And can that imagination change reality?

R.A.: Imagination is all there is.

C.F.: So your imagination and memory shape the way you see things. Can they change reality?

R.A.: Well to be quite truthful, I don't know what reality is. To me, it's not a dualistic state to be in. It is a wholesome state to be in. And the most wholesome state is to be imaginative and open to perceptions and loving and giving.

C.F.: But it isn't always easy to be open to imagining. In your novels you seem to insist that one has to learn to see the perceptions. You're very interested in the process of learning, to see, learning to perceive, and most of your characters seem to have a guide, a mediator.

R.A.: Everyone needs a guide.

C.F.: Antonio has Ultima, and Chávez has Crispín, Solomon and Ismelda help Tortuga, Lucinda and Doña Tules help Abrán, and Rita and Eliseo help Sonny. They all have what Mark Twain would say, in *Life on the Mississippi*, a river boat pilot, teaching them to see what is hidden behind the surface.

R.A.: That's because it is so easy to be misled by the veils of desire and the veils of gross materialism. When our perceptions or spirit is clouded by those veils, we're disconnected. The guides for me and my characters are important because they come to strip away those veils and remind us of the real essence. And the real essence is always inside. We carry it.

C.F.: Why have you changed genres? What moved you to write a detective novel rather than the previous more lyrical or philosophical ones?

R.A.: Several things. One is I don't believe that a writer can ever stay in one place. When people tell me that I should have written a second *Bless Me Ultima*, I see it not only impossible, I see it as something I couldn't have done and didn't want to do. I had to move on to keep learning how to write, to learn how to communicate stories and to flounder at times, to ride the waves up and down in the journey. The second point is that I promised myself very early as a writer to try as many different genres as I could in writing: to write short stories, essays, plays, children's stories. I now have two or three children's stories ready to come out. I wrote a travel journal in China. The novels, of course, are my favorite. The final point is, when I jumped into the murder mystery, *Zia Summer*, it was because Sonny Baca came to me and said "write my story". As I said earlier, I knew nothing about murder mysteries, but I found it fascinating that here's a 30-year-old Chicano living in Albuquerque who works as a private investigator. So he becomes part of my journey, part of my quest, my journey of knowledge. And so, to your question, I say, why not? It could have been *Ultima*, it could have been Sonny Baca. And I find the murder mystery genre very contemporary and capable of communicating to a large number of people. So I just fell into it, and I had a lot of fun writing *Zia Summer*. More importantly, it is a continuation of my journey.

C.F.: In an interview with Bruce-Novoa, he asked you a question about comparing Chicano and African-American literature. Among other things, you warned that there could be a danger of basing cultural identity on the defiance of the white world in defining each minority group. Time has passed. Has that danger become a reality or do you think that each group has really been able--and here I would probably extend the question to not only African-Americans, but to other ethnic minorities and writers--to create their own world, their own self; not just vis a vis the white world? And then I would add, are there any particular points in common that you see?

R.A.: I think the minority cultural groups in this country have to form part of their identity in confrontation with the mainstream culture. We just can't get away from it. The social and political reality, and elements of bigotry, racism and prejudice are there, and we have to deal with them. I think what Bruce-Novoa may have been alluding to is that we, as Chicanos in the 70s creating the artistic Chicano movement, couldn't stay at that place. There were those of us who had to incorporate that dialectic into our work, but then move into all sorts streams. Our literary characters had a lot of other needs, desires, and passion of life to be lived, besides the confrontation with the Anglo-American mainstream culture.

C.F.: Returning to landscape, many of the mainstream Anglo writers have seen landscape in the judeo-christian tradition of something to be productive and dominated, very different from the idea of harmony between human beings and nature which you and other ethnic writers express.

R.A.: I think that in the literary history of Anglo-America that may have been true. Many times writers expressed the dominant desire over land that society expressed, but then there have always been fringes. There's Thoreau and the Transcendentalists who have completely different ideas about how they look at the earth. Today there are a lot of Anglo-American writers that are writing really sensitive and poetic environmental literature you might say, which puts them in touch with the earth on a very spiritual level. So I don't think that we can claim to be the only ones.

C.F.: Which of your multiple identities comes first? A Chicano, a Nuevo Mexicano, a writer, husband?

R.A.: I think it's all of the above, but when you strip away the labels you realize that we all have a life's work to do on earth. Mine has been to explore the spiritual depths of my community, of my culture here in New Mexico, and to find myself in that realm. I look at my writing as a journey of knowledge, a journey of learning who I am and how I can clarify that person, that essence within and how I can finally join that essence to the universe.

C.F.: Again, referring back to your interview with Bruce-Novoa, you were discussing how the Chicano writer has a disadvantage, from the language to the education, to publishing... Do you think there is still a disadvantage or, now since multiculturalism is in fashion and politically correct, has it become an advantage?

R.A.: The disadvantage to Chicano/a writers in this country stems from the fact that mainstream America doesn't read writers from the margins. A few sympathetic readers read the works of Chicanos, Native Americans, blacks, etc. And since many of us are published by small presses our books don't get wide distribution. Yes, there is a multicultural sensibility going around, and some (especially teachers) are reading the so-called "minority" communities in the USA. This positive push is especially gratifying when it happens in schools, and young students get to read a variety of literature. But overall the mainstream is still not very interested. In fact, there is conservative reaction toward our declaration of "independence" and identity. Politicians constantly raise the fear of the Balkanization of the USA. A false fear, because we can claim our inheritance and still live in and communicate with mainstream America.

We don't appear in movies and television. And when we do the roles are often negative and stereotyped. Yes, a few major publishers are courting and publishing Latino writers. I am now published by a major trade publisher. But the bottom line for publishers is income. If our books don't sell we will be dropped. And if mainstream readers aren't interested in the Chicano/a experience, we will have to rely on our community to read us. We don't want to be "token" authors, and we don't want to be the "fad" of the day, we want to be published and read because we have something important to say in our literature. What we have to say is for our community, but it's also for the world.

C.F.: Do you think the children of minority groups are getting the education, the role models they need for a wholesome cultural identity?

R.A.: No, that would be one of the places where things could be better. I told you I was publishing children's stories and I have two or three that are coming out in the next couple of years, but if you look at the portrayal of our community in children's literature, it's not there. It's simply not there, so the literature that in this case, let's say chicanitos read, is a literature of assimilation, telling them to assimilate into Anglo-America. It's not a literature that tells them who they are, and something about their history, and something about their traditions and their language. There's a tremendous amount of work that needs to be done in that area.

C.F.: What about the use of language? We were talking before about how important language is in a culture. You write in English, and you put some Spanish into it. How much Spanish and why? And how does that affect your audience?

R.A.: Everytime I do a reading or when teachers, who will very often send the wonderful reviews that their students, especially in high school, have done of my work, the issue arises. There are always two or three students that will say, "Well you shouldn't have used as much Spanish as you did, because I didn't understand it." I think that I write in English because my education was in English, my entire education, even graduate education. And so that is the language that I am most fluent in speaking and writing. If language is a tool, I use the tool that I master best. The Spanish in my novels should lend a kind of a natural rhythm, it should remind the reader of the universe that I live in. The Spanish reader in my community will

again be reminded that he's an insider in the novel and know certain things that others don't, so there's all sorts of levels of ambiguity that go far beyond just code-switching to me. I think that the text should evolve as a natural organic whole and Spanish is not put in, just to put in Spanish. It's there because of a multiplicity of creative reasons.

C.F.: Much of your Spanish appears in exclamations or where there's an emotional aspect. Is it in emotional reactions that you favor Spanish as being more natural?

R.A.: I don't know, I never looked at it that way.

C.F.: Many of the emotional outbursts of your characters or the expressions of familial relationships are in Spanish. Equally, those expressions of a traditional Nuevo Mexicano world view and spiritual life, or of those characters who hold these views, appear in Spanish more frequently.

R.A.: That's interesting. You should do a paper on that.

C.F.: In many bilingual people, there are spheres where one language favors the other, depending on the context. There is a very different feel and the public language just doesn't feel right for the expressions of private life. That seems to be the case with some of your characters.

R.A.: Muy interesante.

C.F.: Getting back to other issues, do you think that Chicano literature needs its own literary canon, or should it, or will it become part of the mainstream literary canon? Or do we do away with the canon?

R.A.: I think the answer might be both. It exists as a literature that evolves the world view of a community, and so it possesses the world view in opposition to the Anglo-American world view. But there is nothing wrong with it moving into mainstream literature and becoming part of the canon. If the works are good, there's no reason why this country can't learn to deal with an internal community writing literature that has something very important to say to it.

C.F.: Do you think that this country can take this tremendous influx of multiculturalism or, as many see it, is it a threat to the American identity?

R.A.: I think the only threat is narrow-mindedness. I have a great deal of faith in people and in the fluidity with which they relate to each other and how they borrow, give, and take. Even cultures who seem very different from each other can live side by side. So I have a faith that multiculturalism can happen in any country and certainly in this country. This country is very big and very strong and, in many ways, it is open-hearted. The problem comes from those who resist, those who are not open-hearted, who are narrow-minded. Their internal prejudices lead them not to read someone else's literature or not to allow that person to come into their lives. To me, that's the threat. Different cultural groups can get along. Of course we can.

C.F.: I think I've taken enough of your time this evening. Gracias.

R.A.: De nada.