This interview dates back to September 26, 1991. Mr. Anaya and his wife Patricia, who were guests at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio, made a weekend visit to Florence, where the interview took place.

Since 1991, *Anaya's status as the foremost Chicano writer has grown to be acknowledged even outside his original readership. The turning point was the publication, in 1992, of Anaya's fourth novel,* Alburquerque, *to which he refers in this interview as still in progress and which was well received nation-wide. In April, 1994, New York publisher Warner Books put forth a paperback edition of* Alburquerque *and a mass paperback and color-illustrated hardcover edition of* Bless me, Ultima, *Anaya's first novel which since its original publication in 1972 with a small press in California has sold over 300,000 copies. Warner will also publish a Spanish translation of* Bless me, Ultima *for distribution in the United States, an* Anaya Reader, *and two more novels,* Zia Summer *(in 1995) and* Rio Grande Fall *(in 1996).*

Rudolfo Anaya, who has been called" the most widely-read Mexican American" but who for years has been, as one critic put it, "celebrated in the West and barely known back East," has now finally emerged into the nation-wide circuit of readership. At the time of our interview, Anaya, as well as Chicano literature at large, was "on the verge" of receiving national attention. In the light of the unprecedented investment on his books on the part of a large Eastern publishing house, the writer's words concerning the reasons why mainstream America was beginning to take notice of Chicano writers assume further interest and relevance.

M. M.

RUDOLFO A. ANAYA

"The Cutting Edge of the Struggle." An Interview with Mario Materassi

Maybe because your name was first mentioned to me by Henry Roth, when I read Bless me, Ultima *I could not help seeing many affinities between your novel and* Call It Sleep. *I don't want to suggest any dependence on your part. I am only talking about paradigmatic analogies. Had you read* Call It Sleep? *Was it in any way a book that you had in mind?*

I had read *Call It Sleep* in college. It was an underground classic. For me at that time, 1958, *Call It Sleep* was not an easy book to understand. Influence in terms of any kind of narrative style or theme or approach or even the idea of the child as the main protagonist in the story was not there, and it wasn't there for a number of reasons. When I began to write *Bless me, Ultima,* I had already read many American writers. I came from a family that had no education; my parents had not gone to grade school, and my only aspiration was to finish high school. If I did that, I was doing well. So, most of the literature that influenced me I read at the university undergraduate level. When I started writing *Bless me, Ultima* . . .

Which was when? What year?

It was published in 1972. I probably started it in '62 or '63. I worked on it for a good, I'd say, seven years, possibly ten.

One of the feelings about these writers was that I could not use the American writers' sense of place in the novel that I wanted to create, which was a novel about a small town in New Mexico inhabited by Spanish speaking old Mexican-Hispanics who had settled in those valleys where I grew up, especially the Pecos River valley in eastern

New Mexico. So, the process of writing *Bless me, Ultima* was a process of finding not only my story but also a way to write, a unique way to portray my community, a unique voice. Probably that is what it has in common with *Call It Sleep* or any other novel that comes out of a particular community, whether it would be ethnic or regional or gender related. What I am sure Henry Roth struggled with as he was writing *Call It Sleep,* was discovering his own voice and how to tell that story. It is the same thing I struggled with when I started my novel—how to find my own voice to tell the story of Antonio Màrez, the boy in *Bless me, Ultima.*

Because in your case, as well as in Roth's, there was no background, no literary tradition to reach back for.

Not within my community.

That's what I meant.

And also, not in the American writers I was reading. Although I was influenced by them and I admired them and probably tried to emulate them or imitate them, it could not be done. Somehow, Roth and Hemingway and Faulkner and Wolfe were not talking about my corner of the world. In fact, maybe the one that comes the closest is Thomas Wolfe because he seems to have this love affair with the small town in the South, with the family and the pressures on the family.

You decided not to write in Spanish?

Spanish is my native tongue. I only spoke Spanish with my parents.

Which is similar to Antonio's experience. Antonio learns English in school, right?

Right. And so did I. The novel is very autobiographical. It uses the background, the setting of my home town in New Mexico, the valleys ...

Even the names are the same. You did not change them.

Some of the names are the same. My grandfather farmed and my parents were born in Puerto de Luna. It's still there. I was born in Las

Pasturas, a little village nearby. I used the environment, the geography, the lakes, the river.

Did you ever think of writing in Spanish?

No, because I took my training in the English Department and, therefore, I was reading English and American literature and world literature in translation. A curious phenomenon, I believe, about *Bless me, Ultima* is that, in the process of creating it and thinking back to how I wanted to constitute that world of my childhood which had taken place in Spanish, I thought a lot of it through in Spanish.

I was wondering about that. As a matter of fact, quite often your English acquires a Spanish flavor.

Yes. That novel, of all the ones I've written, has that sense of soul, of *anima,* of contact with the village tradition of New Mexico. I was trying to think of the events, the major events that I wanted to portray in the novel, and so many of them, especially with the old people, took place in Spanish. It was the only language they spoke.

An extremely interesting aspect of that novel is the converging of at least three different ways of relating to the Unknown. There is the official, institutionalized way of Catholicism. There is a sort of diffuse animism—I am thinking, for example, of the episode when Samuel takes Antonio to see the carp. And there is Ultima's way. Her spirituality seems to resolve all conflicts among the various ways. Is this something that you drew from your tradition? Was there this multilayered spirituality in your background?

Yes. One of the things that every writer attempts to do is to reach as deep as possible below the mundane surface of everyday reality. I was looking back at my childhood, reliving those experiences, and recognizing my attempts to create a meaning for myself—a meaning not only for my life but also, it seems, a meaning, a world view that explained my community. When I looked back I began to see many different levels. I began to see that there was not only the level of the Catholic Church and its teachings but also that world of animism, created partly out of the stories told by the people, the *cuentos,* and

partly out of the imagination of the children. That is, by my childhood friends and me as we grew up. We heard stories and we told stories, and the idea of the storyteller or the mythmaker became extremely important to me. Probably, more and more my world points to what is commonly called animism—the idea that the universe is infused with spirit.

Like the presence *of the river.*

That's what I felt when I was a child. When I went to the river, whether I was with my friends or alone, I always had a feeling that there was something more than just the river, there was something more than the trees and the water where we went swimming or fishing. This was especially true when I found myself alone. When I found myself alone by the river or coming home late in the afternoon or maybe sometimes going down to cut wild grass for a milk cow we kept, and it would be late, there would be this presence, this feeling of being watched. The feeling that the river itself was alive and it had a heartbeat and a rhythm and a message to convey. And the most exhilarating part of it was being swept up in it. If you allowed yourself, you were swept up in that spirit. It was very frightening for a child. The minute you feel it, you run! You run away from it because you don't understand it. There will be very few people to whom you could go to explain what is happening when you feel that. This is why Ultima enters the novel. She comes, in a way, to teach Antonio to trust that feeling, to trust that spirituality, that infusion of life which is all around him in the open hills and in the river.

The interesting thing is that the father, too, could have given him that message. This is clear from their final conversation.

Yes. But Antonio never turns to his father. He is too attached to his mother. It occurs to me, since you started the comparison with *Call It Sleep,* that Roth's boy is extremely alienated from *his* father for different reasons.

I wouldn't say that Antonio is alienated *from his father.*

Perhaps not alienated, but I would say not close to him. The father has grown sons, older than Antonio, and the war has taken

them away. But he dreams. The father's dream is, "When my boys return." He never turns to Antonio and says, "You're here, why don't you and I do something?" In that respect, there is a distance.

But it is the father who brings Ultima into the family. The connection based on their mutual respect for the llano *is there. So when, at the end, the father opens up and talks about what it means to be out in the* llano, *this connects with the beginning. It does not come as a surprise.*

Yes. It is the father who has felt the elevation of flying. When you really feel the surge of energy of the earth, of the place you love the most, trust the most or are connected to, you feel that elation of flying. The father had felt it on the *llano,* and this is obviously related to the theme of people who can fly. Ultima, being a *curandera* or a shaman, has the ability to fly, so that ties in one theme and, yes, it is the father who brings Ultima into the family. The mother is connected to the river. She turns her attention to the church, while the attention of Ultima and the father, in this roundabout way, is to the land.

At the same time, Ultima is also the one who teaches Antonio that there is but one water, that there need not be any contradiction between the sea and the moon and between different kinds of blood and of water, as it all flows together. So, in a sense, she brings together the whole reality for the child and, of course, its beauty. Her name seems to convey the ultimate message of the novel.

Polarities, in the novel, were extremely important to me. In fact, probably the idea of those dualities permeates the novel. It starts quite obviously with the idea of good and evil because Antonio lives in the moral universe of his mother. Then I stretched the mythological roots of the novel into the indigenous Native American world. The Aztecs, for example, who conceived of the universe in dualities, provide a great kinship not only to the European Catholic world Antonio grows up in but also to the indigenous world that he first begins to see through Ultima.

There seems to be a hint that Ultima is in part Indian herself. Am I overreading? Her dark complexion, the way she wants to be buried ...

I think that's very true. A great percentage of the Mexican population in New Mexico are *mestizos.* The *españoles* who first came up in the sixteenth century to colonize along the Rio Grande were also *mejicanos,* and they settled all along the Indian pueblos of the Rio Grande. So we think of our cultural roots as being part of that *mestizaje.* By the early sixties, when I began to work on my novel, I became very interested in exploring that part of my heritage, my history, my roots, which we had not been taught in school or at home. We had been very divorced from the indigenous Native American cultures and so I read about Aztec and Native American thought. Also, by that time, I had formed a relationship with the Indian pueblos, specifically Taos. I am very interested in their world view inasmuch as I feel it belongs, in part, to me. It starts showing up, I think, in the symbols that I use, for example in the symbols that come from the archetypal lagoon. The symbols appear as indigenous symbols. That, to me, was very interesting. It was part of the process of writing *Bless me, Ultima.*

And, of course, the importance of the animals: the fish, the owl . . .

Yes, absolutely. Animals play an important role in the *cuentos,* in the folk tales I heard as a child growing up. By the time I started writing *Bless me, Ultima,* I began to manipulate them so that I could use them the way I wanted. The owl is most often associated with witchcraft-a witch takes the form of an owl to travel. I grew up listening to all these stories, so when I present Ultima her anima becomes an owl.

I must say I found it sort of odd to see Ultima going to mass because she has all the trappings of the bruja!

Well, the *brujas* are often in the front row in church every Sunday, you see! That's not a problem.

Incidentally, those are marvelous scenes that you have between Antonio and his friends. Their constant minimal violence which is actually pretty violent at times. The harshness, the unsophisticated way children have of coming directly to the point that concerns them, with no regard at all for each other's feelings. This, again, reminds me of Call It Sleep,

although I am not suggesting a dependence but only a parallelism or delayed *parallelism.*

Yes, I do portray this world of violence in the novel. People have pointed it out to me: "You kill a lot of people!" It starts in death and ends in death and there are deaths in between. Probably, I was reflecting how I felt as an observer. As a child, I think, I was already an observer. I used to look closely at things. I did not know I was saving them to write about them but I noticed people and events and I felt that they were very important. One thing that became part of the novel is the brutal aggressiveness of the children that I grew up with. We had very good manners at home—I was taught very good manners at home—but the world of the playground at school and then, later on, when we played baseball or went fishing or just out together in the summer, was very aggressive. And so my schoolmates are portrayed as animals. One is called Horse. Another one is Bones because the kids say his family gave him raw meat to eat.

I was at a dance in my hometown, recently, having a good time. We had gone to a reunion and we were talking about how it was to grow up. And that fact was substantiated because some of the men of my generation, remembering back, actually said, "We don't know why we were like that. We were lucky we survived." It was rough growing up. We learned who to watch out for. You didn't keep a grudge but you never turned your back on the guy that could really arm wrestle you to the ground.

Let me ask you about the rest of the trilogy, Heart of Aztlàn *and* Tortuga.

Heart of Aztlàn takes place in Albuquerque. In 1952 my family moved to Albuquerque, and so I tried to capture the sense of living in a barrio in that city. Also, I was very interested in the mythology of Mexico that the Chicano Movement was drawn to. I looked at the legend of Quetzalcòatl, the deity of the Toltecs and later of the Aztecs and the Mayas, the god of art and illumination and wisdom and agriculture, asking myself if it was possible to use myth in a contemporary setting.

Then I wrote *Tortuga,* which is set in a hospital for crippled

children. When I was sixteen my back was broken in a very serious accident. I was paralyzed and in a hospital for a summer and was never expected to walk again. It was a very difficult story to write but probably *Tortuga* is my best written novel, although not as widely circulated or loved as *Bless me, Ultima.* "Tortuga," by the way, is the name the kids give the boy because of the body cast. That's why they call him the Turtle.

Folk tales and mythology are very important ingredients in your fiction, aren't they?

Yes, they are. One novella, *The Legend of the Llorona,* is about one of those mythical creatures of our folk tales. Another one, *Lord of the Dawn,* is about Quetzalcòatl. Right now I am working on a new play, titled *matachines.* These are dancers we have in the pueblos in New Mexico. They dance for feast days. The matachines were used by the Franciscans to convert the Indians. I have a new novel, *Alburquerque.* The setting is urban and contemporary. The theme of assimilation is very strong. Now the Chicano is more urban, more middle-class, producing more professionals and, therefore, losing a great deal of the culture. How is our culture to be maintained?

The eternal American dilemma. What about the world of the llano? *This world entered literature for the first time with* Bless me, Ultima. *You wrote about it as of something on its way out. Has it changed? Is it disappearing?*

Well, it is and it isn't. In the urban setting, more and more of the children go to high school and learn only the Anglo American experience. They don't experience some of the traditional ceremonies and rituals with which my generation grew up. Growing up in a small town, we had those ceremonies around us. We had the language. I think the question for us is, can we take some elements of that culture and portray them in literature, so that our community sees their reflection and perhaps understands their importance and their value? If the artist portrays part of those traditions, then perhaps all is not lost. Many young people in school are becoming interested because everybody looks for their roots at one time or another: Who am I? Where did I come from?

What about the language?

Recently I had a very sad discussion on this subject. We were at a party in Albuquerque, talking to a Chicano who is a linguist. His commentary was that in another generation we will have lost our language. Possibly, my generation is the last one to keep it, as we are shifting more and more to English. At the same time, you see in the community young people who have these interests—some are studying Spanish, others are doing art work or arts and crafts or theater. Spanish in still alive in a very positive way right now.

The same thing has been happening for at least two generations within the Jewish American community. Year after year, the great problem that the Jewish American writers have had to face is that, more and more, Jews in America are losing some distinctive aspects of their culture, to the point that, in the future, being Jewish may become a question of will rather than substance. It seems that American intellectuals are going through this agony of swimming against the tide, trying to rescue . . .

The word "rescue" is very important: trying to *rescue.* There is a difference, however. We Chicanos are on our own territory. I think that, in many respects, that territory has disappeared for the Jewish writer.

This is very true. Native Americans have an even older claim to that same territory, and they are facing the same . . .

The same thing, yes. There is the gloomy prediction I gave you, and then there is the bright side. At the very moment that we speak of this current that assimilates everything into itself, there is in the United States a strong multicultural movement. Many groups are at a point in time where they are declaring their identity. They are asking questions about it. They want part of that identity to be reflected in the schools and in the universities. The Chicanos want their literature in the curriculum. In that way we will resist complete assimilation. The positive thing is that there is a real search and need for roots in our country, and empowerment of those roots. You can't just feel good because you are a Chicano or a Native American. You must empower that community so that it can preserve itself, so to speak.

At the same time, it is also very important not to aim only *at particularization. The common ground with all the other groups is just as essential.*

Yes, of course. That's true all the time.

*After all, the idea of America is what has brought so many together—***not** *all, but most. It's a fascinating moment in history because it is a time of new balances.*

I think so too. So far, the arena has been mostly in the universities where the minority and the feminist groups have sought to be represented in the curricula as part of the offerings of the universities. In the case of the Chicano, the country has not yet recognized our struggle. It's just on the verge. But after so many years, I think they are beginning to recognize it.

Why so?

We could spend many days talking about the why so. Some people estimate that there are twenty million Mexican Americans in the United States, and we are now beginning to be recognized. America is beginning to see this group as a big market. Chicanos are beginning to be recognized as the border people between North America and South America. Many of these things have been known for a long time but have never really affected positions of power in the United States. One very obvious way by which this is illustrated is in literature. They just haven't paid attention or caught up with Chicano literature. In the past two or three years, some anthologies are including our work. A few publishers have begun to publish Chicano writers. It's going to come. It's a very exciting time to be alive and to be writing!

Well, you've got a headstart on everybody!

[Laughing] Well, I have quite a few books around.

What is the relationship between Chicanos and other groups of Latin origin in the United States?

For the writers of my generation, let's say the first wave of Chicano writers, it is excellent because we all came together and we all

know each other. Even now, I know the Puerto Rican writers of New York and the Central American writers in San Francisco. We have been working together for many years, for example in organizations like the Before Columbus Foundation, which is multicultural. It has been around for years giving yearly, book awards to writers. We haven't been sitting still— we have been doing things! One young man from Florida, a Cuban American writer, Virgil Suarez, wrote me for a story to put in an anthology. Now it's *Latino* writers—not just Chicano, not just a *puertoriqueño,* but a Latino anthology. Even with the new generation we have linkages because even if we don't know them as well as we knew the old writers on a friendly, personal basis, they know our work.

Is there a Latino culture in the United States, or are the various cultures—the Chicano culture, the Cuban culture, the Puerto Rican culture and so on—distinct, although closely related?

No, they are distinct. I thought that you asked the question along literary lines—that is, do writers know each other. And that's how I responded.

I'm glad that you did.

No, the cultures are distinct. But we feel tremendous affinities. That's why I say that, at least in my generation, the affinities we have with the Nuyorican and the Black writers are very close. With the *puertoriqueno* writers we share the language, which not only connects us in the United States but also connects us to Latin America, South America and Mexico.

What about Europe? What about Spain? Is that an important factor in your culture?

No. We have not been connected. Chicano writers *per se* have not been connected in any way to what is going on in Spain. Quite the contrary. In a recent essay that I wrote, titled "The New World Men," in which I discuss the Chicano Movement, my growth as a writer, and where I am now, I suggest that one of the things we did during the Chicano Movement was to declare independence from Anglo America. And by that I mean that I wrote it from within. I wrote about my

place, my community, my people—and that in itself is a declaration of independence because it's *new.*

The Chicano Movement was very emphatic in saying, "We have our identity." That was the first step of the declaration of independence. I was in Spain to deliver this paper and I said, "The second Declaration of Independence, which I make now, is from Spain!" Because in the United States they label us Hispanic, as if Hispanic meant having origins directly from Spain. Instead, our origins are the *mestizo* origins of the New World: we are part Indian and part European. And in order to clarify that identity we have also to tell the Spaniard, "Don't look at me in your image. I have my own image! That's the one I have to portray and those are the values that I have to show in my literature—and that is finally my identity."

That's a long answer to your question!

In a sense, it is a very American answer: you have used the major American episteme, the Declaration of Independence. You have used it four times. Of course, Spain for you is a very faraway homeland. It's many centuries away.

Yes. It is so far away that the reason I called my essay "The New World Men" is because I have to give up those identities in order to find my own. And my identity is New World. I have to look at my roots, right beneath my feet. They have been there now for a long, long time, from all those multicultural people that came into New Mexico.

What about Spanish literature? Do you read Spanish literature?

No.

Not any more then you would read, let's say, Greek or Russian literature?

Right. Not any more. If I were going to be drawn to another literature, my greatest affinity right now would be for Latin American literature. I have read more Garcìa Marquez, Vargas Llosa and Eduardo Galeano, recently, than any Spanish writer. These people have more to tell me about those roots that I am seeking and that history that I am seeking. And I think it is important to clarify why we

are seeking it. It's because we have been so divorced from it, you see? The minute we enter the Anglo American school system we have to give up our identity. We have to acquire the language and the literature, the customs and the traditions of the Anglo American society. And so we go through all that time without knowing any of our own history or our records, without seeing it in school or seeing that it has value. That is the struggle now in the United States. The multicultural community says, "We also have value, we also have an identity if you would just present it in the classroom." There is nothing wrong with it. That is a very crucial element, I think, if other people are to look at our Declaration of Independence and make some sense of it. Otherwise they say, "So what's new? Everybody should be independent." There is a setting that we have, a historical setting, that is important to understand.

A moment ago you were talking about the affinities with the Blacks. Would you care to elucidate?

Well, historically, the Chicano Movement followed immediately after the Civil Rights Movement, which the Blacks led. Perhaps we learned a lot from that, and when in the midsixties the Chicano Movement started we already had a model, so to speak. In my case, I also had friends. When, after publishing in 1972, I began to travel around the country and joined various organizations, I began to meet some of the Black writers who are my contemporaries and discovered that our relationship vis-à-vis the Anglo American society is the same. We have been the "invisible men," the invisible people, as the Blacks have been the invisible people.

The history of slavery is different from the history of the *mejicano* in the Southwest, but there are also many communalities. So, over the years, meeting people like Toni Cade Bambara and Ishmael Reed, many of the Asian American writers, I have become aware of the affinity which we share and of the brotherhood that we feel. We feel that we are on the cutting edge of the struggle for cultural survival.

On these beautiful words, let us end this interview. Thank you for sharing your ideas and for your time.

Thank you. I've enjoyed it.