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This Book Made Rudolfo Anaya the Godfather of Chicano Literature

Rudolfo Anaya is known as the godfather of Chicano literature, but what book led him to getting that title? The answer to that question is, *Bless Me, Ultima*.

Well, hello there, Bookworms. What day is today? It’s Book Club Day! In this video, I’ll talk a little bit about the book, *Bless Me, Ultima*, by Rudolfo A. Anaya and the history behind it. I have two other videos out about this book, one about the bans against this book and one with my own thoughts as a reader. Those are both linked below.

 We are smack-dab in the middle of Hispanic Heritage Month as I’m uploading this video. Hispanic Heritage Month is a bit unique compared to a lot of other heritage months because it spans two months, beginning in the middle of September and ending in the middle of October.

This is for, actually, a very specific reason. Between September 15th and 18th, seven Latin American countries celebrate their independence days. Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua all celebrate on the 15th, Mexico celebrates on the 16th and, then, Chile celebrates independence on the 18th. And also, October 12th is the day that the ever-so controversial Christopher Columbus reached the Americas. Since Spain paid for his trip, this is recognized as Spain’s first encounter with the Americas. By crossing both of these months, Hispanic Heritage Month is able to kick off with the first in a string of independence days and cover several days that are important in Latin American History.

One other thing we should recognize is that, while it’s called Hispanic Heritage Month, it may not be the most inclusive word choice these days. Hispanic refers to people who connect their heritage to Spanish-speaking countries, but this overlooks people from Latin America who have Indigenous or African ancestry as well as Latin Americans who speak Portuguese, like those in Brazil. So, when it was coined, Hispanic Heritage Month was meant to be inclusive, but Latin American, Latino, and Latinx have been growing in popularity and there are some places that have begun to celebrate Latinx Heritage Month or something similar instead.

In honor of Hispanic Heritage Month, our September Book Club book is Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo A. Anaya. According to Humanities, The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Anaya has become the godfather of Chicano literature. His book *Bless Me, Ultima* won the Premio Quinto Sol award back in 1971, and part of the prize was publication of the book which allowed it to become accessible to readers at a critical point in the Chicano Movement which pushed for political and cultural agency for Americans of Mexican descent. This book has been prominent ever since. It has also been regularly challenged and banned because of the complicated way it deals with religion and spirituality, particularly intersection of Catholicism and magic.

*Bless Me, Ultima* tells the story of six-year-old Antonio Marez, who feels himself being pulled in different directions. His mother expects him to follow in her family’s footsteps and become a farmer and a priest. His father hopes he will grow up to have a wandering soul that carries him to the grassy plains that his family loves so much. And when Ultima comes to live with them in her old age, he finds himself relating to her and her practices as a curandera. As a curandera, Ultima has a close connection to the natural world and uses her knowledge of herbal remedies and magical rituals to heal people of illness and save them from the magic of brujas. Throughout the book, Antonio works to navigate his parents’ expectations which stem from different cultures, as well as the complexities of religion and belief.

The conflict between brujas and curanderas is really important to this book, so I did a little bit of light research on the differences between brujas and curanderas and it comes from a pretty complex history. Generally, when these two words are put next to each other, brujas and curanderas are two sides of the same coin. In short, brujas are considered people who use magic for bad reasons and a curandera is someone who used magic for good reasons, but in reality it’s a bit more complicated than that. Historically, a bruja was a colonized person who refused to take on the Catholic religion of their Spanish colonizers. So, at the most basic level, they were an Indigenous person who held onto their beliefs and practices. In contrast, curanderas were people who blended practices and beliefs to include both the non-Christian magics, prayers, or herbal remedies of their indigenous ancestors and the new Catholic religion that had moved into the region. The descendants of the people who colonized Mexico and the American Southwest considered curanderas good because they had accepted Christianity and added it on top of the beliefs and practices that they already had. Any rituals performed in defiance Christianity and of colonization became viewed as the evil magic of witches. See what I mean? It gets pretty complicated because even if these two types of people were fighting one another through their practices, it originates in the conflict of colonization.

*Bless Me, Ultima* has become a work of classic Chicano literature because it represents the cultures, languages, beliefs, families, and lifestyles of the people living in rural New Mexico in the 1940s. It was written to address the thoughts and feelings of Chicano people and the ways that World War II impacted life there. But even more than that, this book talks about the clashing of Indigenous, Spanish, and English-speaking American cultures, particularly the effects of colonization. If you’d like to read this book for yourself but can’t find it at your local library or bookshop, you can find it on Open Library and Internet Archive. Both are free, virtual libraries. You may need to make an account to borrow some books, but they aren’t associated with a particular library system, so they are a good place to look if certain books are banned in your region. Thanks for stopping by today. You can learn more about this book from the two other videos I’ve made about it, or you can check out the links below.

Banning *Bless Me, Ultima*

*Bless Me, Ultima* is a piece of classic Chicano literature, but it’s been banned on numerous occasions. Why is that? You and I? We’re going to get to the bottom of this question.

I couldn’t find the exact number of times that this book has been banned, but since it was published in 1972, it has lived on the American Library Association’s list of top 100 most frequently banned books in the United States. What’s really wild is that it was even burned in 1981 – like actually burned. The Bloomfield School Board in Anaya’s home state of New Mexico ordered the book to be burned. Over the years, this book has been targeted for profanity, violence, depictions of death, and occultism or witchcraft. So, let’s talk about each of these complaints, starting with profanity.

There is actually a fair amount of profanity in this book, mostly in Spanish, so it’s probably not something that you want really young children reading. Most of the profanity comes in the form of name-calling in the schoolyard and occasionally among adults who find someone around them to be particularly detestable in some way. The books is written for young adult and adult readers. It’s not designed for really young readers. This might be a little surprising for some folks because the protagonist is around 5 or 6 years old, but the copy I have is 277 pages of small print. There’s no artwork or anything that should capture a young reader’s attention. Honestly, this book has so many layers that even if I read all the words when I was 13 or 14, I probably would have missed out on a lot of the themes. There’s so much to this book thematically that it lends itself to literature classrooms in upper levels of high school or even college students. So there’s a lot of profanity, but it’s not written with young children in mind and not all books have to be.

You could ask whether or not it needs the profanity. I would say that because the profanity is related largely to name-calling, it serves a purpose in showing the dynamics between different students, especially the power dynamics and also the ways that kids act out sometimes. There’s this scene where Antonio is pressured by the other students to pretend to be a priest and listen to their confessions. One kid who doesn’t believe in the same religion as the other students is forced to make his confession in this game and it becomes clear to Antonio that this is their way of bullying the other kid who doesn’t believe the same things they do because they want him to give the kid an especially hard penance. Antonio ends the game by saying that he forgives the other kid and that no penance is required. The rest of the children shout profanities at Antonio and beat him for not playing the game the way they want him to. The author doesn’t write this scene this way for profanity’s sake. In fact, a lot of this book comes from Anaya’s experiences growing up. In this scene, his use of profanity is to show the ways that kids can be cruel to one another and what it means to stand up for something you believe in – in this case, Antonio is not only standing up for his friend, but also for people who are different, who stand out, or have different cultures or beliefs from the majority.

Let’s move on to the complaints about violence. There’s both violence and death in this book. I wouldn’t say that either is particularly graphic, but they are both present. And I think they are both crucial to the story. There are several deaths throughout the story and each one is part of Antonio’s development as a child who is growing up. They cause him to grapple with questions around good and evil, the role of religion and faith in his life, the impact of war on the soldiers who come home, and Antonio’s understanding of people and their value. For one example, early in the book, the men in the town hunt down a man who killed someone. Ultimately, the men kill him as well in the confrontation. But Antonio learns that the man had come home from fighting in World War II and had been mentally unwell ever since. In this one scene, Antonio grapples with the effects that PTSD can have on a person, he’s confronted with the realities of murder and suicide, he contemplates the things he has been taught about forgiveness, punishment, and the afterlife, and the value of human life. This one scene is a pivotal moment and it’s crucial to the conversation that Antonio has with himself about God and humankind. Many times, book bans point to violence and death as reasons that a book doesn’t belong on shelves, but this is a book that goes far beyond entertainment value. None of the violence or death is gratuitous and every scene has a purpose. Like I mentioned earlier, this book isn’t written for really young children. It’s written for a young adult audience, and it comes with materials to help readers think about the themes in the book and the reasons that the author includes the things he does. It’s really conducive to a teaching environment, so that readers can process all the feelings and thoughts that this book brings up with guidance and support.

So, now this brings us to the charges of witchcraft and occultism – and this is where I think things get particularly complicated. Themes of good and evil, Christianity and paganism exist throughout the book, and a lot of it is built around the character, Ultima. Ultima is a curandera. I talk a little more about this in another video which I’ll below, but the concept of a curandera is born out of the effects of colonialism in the region. A curandera practices Indigenous medicine and sacred rituals while also accepting Catholic teachings. In this book, curanderas are considered good and brujas are considered bad. And throughout the book, Antonio tries to understand the Catholic teachings from his mother and the Church and the Indigenous teachings come from Ultima. He repeatedly questions his own beliefs throughout the book and struggles to understand why bad things happen to good people, why good things happen to bad people, where is God in all the suffering that he sees, what sins can God forgive, and, ultimately, what should he believe. Typically, critics of this book view it as anti-Christian and uplifting of pagan ideology, but I think that critique is a little reductive and comes from an exclusionist way of thinking – this idea that Christianity is the only way and, therefore, the only belief-system that should be represented. I don’t think this book is actually anti-Christian. I think it’s supposed to do a couple things.

Firstly, I think it is meant to provide representation for people who come from a culture that has been formed out of Indigenous and colonial influences. Chicano culture in New Mexico is built on the influences of the Indigenous peoples who were there first, the influences of the Spanish-speaking people who colonized the region, and the influences that came with New Mexico becoming a US state. By writing this book, Anaya is addressing the ways that these different cultures and belief-systems have clashed and influenced each other.

Secondly, I think it’s meant to help readers reflect on the impact of colonialization and missionary work. Colonization has a way of devaluing indigenous people and culture and the conflict between curanderas and brujas in this book is just one thing that reflects this. And colonization tends to come with missionaries. Now missionaries can come with good intentions but elevating the religion of the powerful over the religion of marginalized often comes with the demonization of the marginalized belief system, and I think the history of brujas and curanderas relates heavily to this, because the concept of brujas came from demonizing people who kept their original belief-system, while curanderas came out of people who blended traditional, Indigenous beliefs and medicines with Christianity. Through the character of Antonio, readers of this book come to recognize the complexities of faith and the value inherent to all the different cultures that are interacting with one another in this book. It’s not saying that Christianity is bad, but it is showing the power dynamic between the Christian majority, the marginalized people who hold on to other beliefs, and the people like Ultima who exist in this intersection of different cultures and beliefs. And I think that makes this a really valuable book to learn from, because culture and belief can be really complicated especially when we start to break down power and influence.

I’m going to close out this video with a quote from Anaya, himself. This comes from an interview he gave for Source New Mexico. In this quote, he’s talking about *Bless Me, Ultima* and the backlash it’s gotten over the years. Specifically, he addresses two things. First, he comments on the impact that bans have on marginalized communities. In his case, he’s talking about the way bans against Chicano literature impact Chicano New Mexicans. He says, “It’s telling them, they’re not worthy.” It’s telling every person who’s represented in *Bless Me, Ultima*, that they don’t matter. He then comments on the way that we all benefit when we read cross-culturally. “We have to live together. Isn’t knowing about each other better than not knowing? Resentment and prejudice come when we don’t know.”

Thanks for stopping by. Remember, when you’re here in the Underground Bookshelf space, You Belong.

Should You Read *Bless Me, Ultima*?

Hey, Book clubbers! It’s the last Friday of September, and that means it’s time to talk about our Book of the Month. *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo A. Anaya won the Premio Quinto Sol National Chicano Literary Award and is considered a classic work of Chicano literature, but it has also consistently made the American Library Association’s list of most frequently banned books. At least one ban of this book resulted in the burning of this book. I talk more about the reasons this book was banned in another video, but in this video, I want to open a discussion of this book. I’ll share some of my thoughts about *Bless Me, Ultima*, and I welcome you to share your own thoughts in the comments, or in the Facebook Group for the Underground Bookshelf Book Club. Let’s get started.

There’s this interesting way that Bless Me, Ultima relates to a lot of other books that fit into the mold of American Classics that I think is a very interesting distinction from many of the other books I’ve read. Typically, one of the marks of a good book is the protagonist’s goal and their hero’s journey – the things that they do to achieve their goal and the things that they learn along the way. A book with a protagonist that has no clear goal, who lets life happen to them isn’t all that exciting, so a common piece of advice for new authors is to really develop this part of the plot and the protagonist’s character. But this seems to be less important when it comes to American classics. Books like *Grapes of Wrath*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Jungle*, *The Awakening*, they all have things that their protagonists pursue but that’s not necessarily where the emphasis is and so some readers might not enjoy them as much because there’s less excitement or they’re a slower read. But that doesn’t make them bad books. Right? These books are considered great American classics for a reason. And I think part of that is because the emphasis is on what the characters learn simply by experiencing life in the context of their individual situation. *Bless Me, Ultima* is similar to other classics in this way. There’s less action. It’s a slower read, because it’s not about the protagonist, Antonio achieving a particular goal as much as it’s about him grappling with ideas around good and evil, death and life, religion and faith, family expectations, and the blending and clashing of cultures. It might not be as exciting as a murder mystery, but it’s a richer story because it encourages introspection through the lens of a young boy growing up between cultures and trying to figure out his place in his family and his community.

One of the things Anaya probably does best in this book is highlight the clashing of cultures, the way that different cultures influence each other, particularly when there’s a power dynamic involved. First, there’s the friction between his parents’ cultures. His mother’s family comes from a lineage of Catholic farmers who are deeply connected to the land through the way they cultivate and grow crops. His father comes from a family of vaqueros which are similar to cowboys. His father’s family is also tied to the land, but instead of being connected to fertile farmland, they roam the dry plains. Both Antonio’s parents hope he will follow in their footsteps.

Then there is the friction between Catholicism and the traditional beliefs of the Indigenous people. This one has a strong power dynamic because Catholicism is the religion of the Spanish-speaking colonial power. Even though New Mexico is a US state by the time this book is set, the Catholic Spanish influence is very strong and tends to demonize people who hold onto Indigenous customs and medicines. This culture clash is illustrated through the character of Ultima who is an elderly curandera who comes to live with Antonio’s family in her old age. In short, a curandera is someone who practices indigenous medicine and ritual while also practicing Catholicism. Throughout the book, Ultima cures illnesses and dispels curses using her knowledge of the old ways, but she always waits until after Western medicine fails or the priest refuses to help. She’s often labeled an evil witch and is ultimately killed by someone who believes she has cursed his family. So, in this one character, we see this friction between Indigenous and Western cultures and beliefs. We see someone trying to hold onto her indigeneity in the face of colonialism and we see the way that religion is used to trigger fear of the “other.”

And finally, we see the friction between English-speaking American influence and the way it impacts the Chicano community of New Mexico. This is largely represented through Antonio’s experiences at school where everyone speaks English except for him. He has to hurry up and learn English so that he can do well in his studies even though many of the people around him – including many of his classmates – speak Spanish. And we see his parents, whose families have lived in the region for generations, struggle to adapt to this particular change in their environment. So, this creates another colonial power dynamic between people who speak English and people who don’t.

No book is perfect, so I’ll mention a couple things that might bother some folks. There is a person referred to as Jason’s Indian. We never meet this character. They’re just mentioned in passing a few times and have no impact on the story. They’re an Indigenous person who lives far away from the town and who is visited regularly by a boy named Jason. There are other Indigenous elements touched on through Ultima’s character, but it still stands out as maybe a little insensitive to have this character who is never named but is referred to in this way. There’s also very brief mention of a woman who is deaf and who doesn’t communicate verbally. It’s unclear if she speaks sign language, but there’s a scene in which her husband tells a story and when he is asked where he heard it from, he says that she told him. Everyone laughs at this joke because how could his nonspeaking wife tell him anything. I think this moment in the book, while it’s upsetting to read, it’s probably reflective of the time period that it’s set in. A woman like her, living in rural New Mexico would not have had a lot of access to resources or social supports and would very likely have been the butt of jokes like this one. It’s not nice, but it’s probably realistic.

The complaints that have led to bans of this book include violence, profanity, death, and occultism. There is a lot of profanity, mostly in Spanish, and the protagonist witnesses several deaths throughout the book. I wouldn’t call it graphic or gratuitous, but it is written for an older audience and many copies of this book come with study guides to help readers process and discuss the contents of this book, so this is just something to bear in mind when picking this book up to read.

I found this book to be a slower read for me and it took me longer than I would have like to read it, but I think there’s a lot of value in it, and I can see why it’s considered a classic. If you’re having trouble finding this book at your local library or bookstore, it is available to read for free from Internet Archive and Open Library. Let me know your thoughts about this book in the comments and remember, when you’re here in the Underground Bookshelf space, You Belong.

Links:

This Book Made Rudolfo Anaya the Godfather of Chicano Literature: <https://youtu.be/duRaivm6fao>

Banning Bless Me, Ultima: <https://youtu.be/aIjqdet7igg>

Should you read Bless Me, Ultima: <https://youtu.be/so0Ts6OLtYc>

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