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Review of *Rudolfo A. Anaya: A Critical Companion* By Margarite Fernandez Olmos

Bruce Allen Dick

Appalachian State University

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Rudolfo A. Anaya: A Critical Companion. By Margarite Fernandez Olmos. Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999. Bibliography, index. xi + 162 pp. \$29.95.

Rudolfo Anaya is one of today's leading Chicano writers. Since the release of *Bless Me, Ultima*, his groundbreaking first novel in 1972, Anaya has published eight additional novels, a collection of short stories, a travel journal, an epic poem, and several plays. Over the years his work has received widespread praise throughout the Latino literary community, earning him such laudatory epithets as "Godfather and guru of Chicano literature," "the most acclaimed and universal Chicano writer," and "our poet of the llano and the barrio."

Margarite Fernandez Olmos discusses how Anaya garnered this standing—and more—in *Rudolfo A. Anaya: A Critical Companion*. Focusing primarily on Anaya's first seven novels, this excellent overview also includes helpful commentary on his lengthy career and some of his lesser-known works. Olmos argues that Anaya's fiction has not only secured his place in Chicano literature but helped establish his reputation among mainstream contemporary American writers. Like other texts in the Critical Companions series, the book is divided into three sections: a biographical sketch tracing Anaya's early days as a novelist and professor at the University of New Mexico to his more recent career as a writer of detective fiction; a chapter outlining Anaya's place in the larger context of Chicano literature; and an extensive analysis of Anaya's main fiction, beginning with *Ultima*, a coming-of-age

story about a young boy finding strength and wisdom in a *curandera*, or healer, and concluding with *Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert* (1996), which Olmos maintains "reflects the quest for truth that pervades all of Anaya's writings."

As with most studies of Anaya's work, *Bless Me, Ultima* receives the most critical praise. One "of very few Chicano 'best-sellers,'" the novel celebrates most of the themes that identify Anaya's best fiction—an appreciation for the land, especially New Mexico, for which Anaya "feels a spiritual bond"; indigenous myths, legends, and symbols that preserve Latino and Native American culture; bilingualism; and the constant search for knowledge. While his next two novels, *Heart of Aztlán* (1976) and *Tortuga* (1979), fail to measure up to *Ultima*, they express Anaya's "ongoing concerns" with spiritualism, cultural diversity, and community. *Albuquerque*, one of Anaya's more accessible novels, published in 1992, introduces a minor character named Sonny Baca, who figures prominently in *Zia Summer* (1995), *Rio Grande Fall* (1996), and *Shaman Winter* (1999), Anaya's detective novels, which represent a "dramatic shift in subject matter and style," but reflect many of the ideas in Anaya's other fiction, including "respect for the environment and traditional cultures."

Olmos's *Critical Companion* is a welcome addition to Anaya scholarship. It should appeal not only to the beginning student of Latino literature but to the scholar interested in Anaya's ongoing and important role in contemporary American letters.

BRUCE ALLEN DICK
Department of English
Appalachian State University