

Rationales for CHALLENGED BOOKS

VOLUME 2 ■ Prepared by NCTE

NCTE Anti-Censorship Center

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NCTE Censorship Hotline: 1-800-369-6283, ext. 3634

Rationales Listed by Title	
BOOK TITLE	BOOK AUTHOR
Adventures of Tom Sawyer, The	Mark Twain
Afterlife, The	Gary Soto
Armageddon Summer	Jane Yolen and Bruce Coville
Battle of Jericho, The	Sharon Draper
Bean Trees, The	Barbara Kingsolver
Bell Jar, The	Sylvia Plath
Black Ice	Lorene Cary
Bless Me, Ultima	Rudolfo Anaya
Bluest Eye, The	Toni Morrison
Boy Meets Boy	David Levithan
Breakfast of Champions	Kurt Vonnegut
Bucking the Sarge	Christopher Paul Curtis
Canterbury Tales, The	Geoffrey Chaucer
Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopypants	Dav Pilkey
Catherine, Called Birdy	Alison Strickland
Child Called "It", A	Dave Pelzer
Cold Mountain	Charles Frazier
Continental Drift	Russell Banks
Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, The	Mark Haddon
Dancing Naked	Shelley Hdrilitschka
David v. God	Mary E. Pearson
Devil's Arithmetic, The	Jane Yolen
Double Date	R. L. Stine

Dragonwings	Laurence Yep
Drowning Anna	Sue Mayfield
Eclipse of Moonbeam Dawson, The	Jean Davies Okimoto
Face on the Milk Carton, The	Caroline B. Cooney
Fade	Robert Cormier
Fahrenheit 451	Ray Bradbury
Farewell to Manzanar	Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston
Feed	Michael T. Anderson
Fountainhead, The	Ayn Rand
Franny and Zooey	J. D. Salinger
Freak the Mighty	Rodman Philbrick
Frenchtown Summer	Robert Cormier
Gangsta Rap	Benjamin Zepaniah
Gathering, The	Isobelle Carmody
Geography Club	Brent Hartinger
Girl, Interrupted	Susanna Kaysen
Going After Cacciato	Tim O'Brien
Golden Compass, The	Philip Pullman
Good Night, Maman	Norma Fox Mazer
Grass Dancer, The	Susan Power
Grass Harp, The	Truman Capote
Handmaid's Tale, The	Margaret Atwood
Harry Potter Series	J. K. Rowling
Heart of Darkness	Joseph Conrad
House of Spirits, The	Isabel Allende
House on Mango Street, The	Sandra Cisneros

How I Paid for College	Marc Acito
How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents	Julia Alvarez
I Am the Cheese	Robert Cormier
Inherit the Wind	Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee
Invisible Man	Ralph Ellison
Ironman	Chris Crutcher
It's Not Easy Being Bad	Cynthia Voigt
Joey Pigza Loses Control	Jack Gantos
Joy Luck Club, The	Amy Tan
Jubilee Journey	Carolyn Meyer
Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa	Mark Mathabane
Keeping Christina	Sue Ellen Bridgers
Kitchen God's Wife, The	Amy Tan
Last Safe Place on Earth, The	Richard Peck
Light in the Attic, A	Shel Silverstein
Lovely Bones, The	Alice Sebold
Lucky	Alice Sebold
Martian Chronicles, The	Ray Bradbury
"Master Harold"...and the Boys	Athol Fugard
Messenger	Lois Lowry
My Losing Season	Pat Conroy
My Posse Don't Do Homework	Lou Anne Johnson
Native Son	Richard Wright
Night	Elie Wiesel
Nightjohn	Gary Paulsen

Oedipus Rex	Sophocles
Of Mice and Men	John Steinbeck
Pay It Forward	Catherine Ryan Hyde
Peace Like a River	Leif Enger
Pedro and Me	Judd Winick
Perks of Being a Wallflower, The	Stephen Chbosky
Plainsong	Kent Haruf
Power of One, The	Bryce Courtenay
Prince of Tides, The	Pat Conroy
Push	Sapphire
Raisin in the Sun, A	Lorraine Hansberry
Rats Saw God	Rob Thomas
Rebecca	Daphne Du Maurier
Red Badge of Courage, The	Stephen Crane
Red Pony, The	John Steinbeck
Richochet River	Robin Cody
Sahara Special	Esme Raji Codell
Secret Life of Bees, The	Sue Monk Kidd
Shattering Glass	Gail Giles
Siddhartha	Hermann Hesse
Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, The	Ann Brashares
Snow Falling on Cedars	David Guterson
Song of Solomon	Toni Morrison
Sons and Lovers	D. H. Lawrence
Speak	Laurie Halse Anderson
Stuck in Neutral	Terry Trueman

Surviving the Applewhites	Stephanie S. Tolan
Tears of a Tiger	Sharon M. Draper
Vampire Almanac	R. C. Welch
Walk Two Moons	Sharon Creech
Warmest December, The	Bernice L. McFadden
Watcher, The	James Howe
Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963, The	Christopher Paul Curtis
When Dad Killed Mom	Julius Lester
Who Killed My Daughter	Lois Duncan
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?	Edward Albee
Witness	Karen Hesse
Woman Hollering Creek	Sandra Cisneros
Wuthering Heights	Emily Brontë

Bless Me, Ultima

by Rudolfo Anaya

Rationale by Jocelyn A. Chadwick, Discovery Education, Silver Spring, Maryland

Grade Levels and Audience

Recommended for grades 11–12, and for courses in American Literature and Humanities

Plot Summary

Published in 1995, *Bless Me, Ultima*, though not a complete autobiography, is based on Rudolfo Anaya's memories of his childhood in Pastura, New Mexico. The story is of Antonio Marez, his coming of age, and his experiences with his family, with his aunt Ultima, who is a *curandera*—a healer—and with his friends and teachers. The narrative unfolds with Antonio's witnessing the vigilante slaying of a crazed WWII veteran, Lupito, by townspeople. Antonio is traumatized by this event and does not understand such violence against a man who is so clearly not in full possession of his faculties.

Readers also witness Antonio's initially difficult transition into school and then his ultimate success. Paralleling Antonio's experiences in school is a feud between Ultima and the local, evil *brujo*, or witch, Tenorio, whose daughters have put a curse on Antonio's uncle Lucas. Of course Ultima, who has healed members of Antonio's family before, determines to heal Lucas, but not before apprising Tenorio of the situation and allowing him time to ask his daughters to lift the curse. He does not. He does, however, seek revenge upon Ultima, whom he blames for the subsequent deaths of his three daughters.

What emerges as ironic for Antonio lies in the townspeople's reactions to Ultima, many of whom she has healed; they fail to come to her defense. In one of his efforts to save Ultima, Antonio becomes seriously ill, and it is Ultima with her knowledge of healing who saves him. In his delirium Antonio repeatedly tells of his witnessing Narcisco's death at the hands of an enraged Tenorio. Narcisco is the town drunk who tries in vain to save Ultima and who respects the old ways. It is in Antonio's delirium that we see the emerging artist/writer and not the priest Antonio's mother so hopes he will become.

Although Tenorio does kill Ultima, he himself is killed by Antonio's uncle, Pedro. Tenorio not only kills Ultima but also her familiar, the owl. Antonio must bury the owl in the place and in the manner Ultima requested. The novel concludes with Antonio's emerging consciousness as to who and what Ultima and her owl were and who he is becoming.

Strengths of the Work

This novel possesses a number of important themes and explores issues in Latino culture that no other novel during this time period does. In one way, *Bless Me, Ultima* is a coming-of-age novel:

we follow Antonio as he is becoming aware of himself and his heritage. Interestingly, we also follow Antonio's older brothers who have returned from war. In this way, Anaya provides readers with a dual perspective of young people—the very young, emerging boy-child and the more experienced, war-weary, older brothers. Into this dichotomy Anaya places Antonio's Mother, Maria Marez, who sees one path for her young son, Antonio's father, Gabriel Marez, who sees another path, and finally Ultima, Antonio's surrogate grandmother, who actually impacts the boy's life path.

The novel is an anatomy of a family and an analysis of family dynamics that can ultimately influence and shape the character and identity of children. It is also a journey into Mexican American folklore and religion. Again, no other American novel during the mid-late 20th century actually addresses these themes so expertly and compassionately. That the novel's voice comes from young Antonio himself echoes a master of the past—Mark Twain.

The most fascinating and engaging facet of the novel is Anaya's exploration of the role of the *curandera* both in the Latino culture and within Antonio's family. Ultima introduces Antonio to his heritage and, indeed, his legacy. She shows him their connection and bond with nature and the natural elements. She shows him her power and begins to teach him in these ways as well. What is important for Ultima is the universal truth that humans often forego the power and strength contained within the cultural beliefs and lore to embrace instead codified, social systems. In essence, this is a novel about transitions—transition from the rural to the urban, transition from folk traditions and beliefs to codified, social beliefs, transitions from voicelessness to an emerging voice.

Possible Objections

Often, those who challenge this novel do so because of the elements of perceived witchcraft. However, Ultima and her ways and beliefs are representative of the Mexican American culture and folk history. That the *curandera* is a cultural fact is undeniable, and Anaya expertly chisels out the character and nature of this healer and surrogate grandmother. To deny or challenge this representation is to challenge the efficacy of a culture's past.

That some may view Anaya's rendering of Ultima as a challenge to Catholicism is an incorrect reading of the text. What Anaya does through the religious Lunas and Ultima is to present to young Antonio the culture of his past and the beliefs of his present. Of course, it will be he, Antonio, as he continues to mature, who makes the ultimate decision as to how he will proceed in life; he will, however, be aware of both facets of his heritage.

As for the violence in the work, which critics have cited, the war and its lifetime impact for veterans also is undeniable. That some people suffer from alcoholism is yet another reality. That individuals can often commit horrible acts toward other human beings is another, regrettable, truth. Anaya takes his time to create a variety of very human, very real, and emotionally wrenching acts which play out in front of Antonio and which will have profound impacts on the young boy. This novel is indeed a coming-of-age narrative in which the main character must confront the harsh realities of life, even at his tender age. Teachers must remember to help students understand that for

every violent act in this novel there is an equal reaction—a reaction that speaks to the verisimilitude of the piece.

Alternate Works

While there are many coming-of-age novels—*Catcher in the Rye*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The House on Mango Street*, *Always Running*, and even *The Joy Luck Club*—none of these novels addresses specifically what Anaya does in this work. Also, the previously cited works do not depict a boy so young and trace along with him his psychological and emotional transitions. In addition, the novels above, with the exception of *The Joy Luck Club*, do not focus on the cultural, folk traditions of the primary character.

If time does allow, however, teachers might want to consider a thematic unit on “coming of age” and compare and contrast several of these works, enabling students to experience and think critically about the similarities and differences of young people from different cultural backgrounds.

Awards

Before Columbus American Book Award

Excellence in the Humanities Award

Pen Center West Award for Fiction, 1992

National Chicano Literary Award, 2002

National Medal of Arts, 2002

Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature, 2004 (University of California, Santa Barbara)

References

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NCTE/IRA Statement on Intellectual Freedom

All students in public school classrooms have the right to materials and educational experiences that promote open inquiry, critical thinking, diversity in thought and expression, and respect for others. Denial or restriction of this right is an infringement of intellectual freedom.

—from Common Ground

The National Council of Teachers of English is happy to bring you this second CD-ROM of rationales for another 100+ commonly taught works. It is our hope that you use these rationales as resources for creating your own rationales for the books you teach. In addition, you will find new resources here, such as NCTE Guidelines on Censorship & Intellectual Freedom, a form for writing your own rationales, and a sample presentation to a school board in defense of a challenged book.