

Other Americas

Book Summaries

Bless Me, Ultima (1972) is a novel of childhood memory and magic created by New Mexico writer, Rudolfo A. Anaya. The novel was published in 1972 and was Anaya's first novel. It was published at a time when Mexican American writing was only beginning to "come of age." The story deals with an individual coming of age experience in an atmosphere that conveys, with simplicity and eloquence, Hispanic experience in America's southwest. Anaya was born in New Mexico and is a descendant of the Spaniards who emigrated from present-day Mexico as early as 1598. These early New Mexicans received land grants from the king of Spain and have lived on the land continuously since that time.

The novel deals with a sensitive seven year old, Antonio, son of Gabriel and Maria Marez. From the earliest moments of his life the boy experiences the dualism in his parents' family. His mother, from the Luna family, represents the soil and the stable farmers. His father, Marez, is representative of the horseman who ranges over much territory. Antonio is torn between these two worlds.

Woman Hollering Creek (1991) by Sandra Cisneros is a collection of short vignettes that capture moments in the Mexican-American life - at home, at school, with friends. Some of these focus on integral parts of urban Chicano culture, others on the interaction between that culture and the dominant Anglo society. From Cisneros comes a story collection of breathtaking range and authority, whose characters give voice to the vibrant and varied life on both sides of the Mexican border. From a young girl revealing secrets only an eleven-year-old can know to a witch woman circling above the village on a predawn flight, the women in these stories offer tales of pure discovery, filled with moments of infinite and intimate wisdom.

Invisible Man (1952) by Ralph Ellison generated the impact of a cultural tidal wave from the moment of its publication. This pioneering work of African-American fiction addressed not only the social, but the psychic and metaphysical, components of racism, the invisibility of a large portion of this country's populace and the origins of that invisibility in one people's willful blindness and other's habit of self-concealment.

Ellison has created far more than a commentary on race. He has attempted to decipher the cruel and beautiful paradox that is America, a country founded on high ideals and cold-blooded betrayals. He sends his naïve hero plunging through almost every stratum of this divided society, from an ivy-covered college in the deep South to the streets of Harlem, from a sharecropper's shack to the floor of a hellish paint factory, from church jubilees to street riots.

Love Medicine (1984) is Louise Erdrich's first novel in which she explores 60 years in the lives of a small group of Chippewa living on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in North Dakota. Aside from the first chapter set in 1981, the narratives follow a loose chronology, and the conversational tone of the novel is representative of the storytelling tradition in Native American culture. It draws from Ojibwa myths, story-telling tradition in Native American culture. It also incorporates the Euro-Indian experience, especially through the younger generations.

Like Water for Chocolate (1989) by Laura Esquivel was published in Mexico and has been translated into a number of languages. It is an exciting, innovative novel in its use of recipes, lists of ingredients, and descriptions of food smells, household utensils, and kitchen atmosphere. It also deals with a long-long but forbidden love between Tita and her brother-in-law Pedro. Set in rural Mexico during the era of the Mexican Revolution, Esquivel's novel opens with instructions on how to chop onions. These instructions come from the main character's great niece, who proceeds to narrate the entire novel.

The novel deals with tradition and family relationships, personal fulfillment versus family expectations, courage, effrontery, adultery, nurturing, and the

role of women in society and in the family. Food is an important symbol since the original purpose of family, according to anthropologists, was the procuring and preparation of food to ensure survival. Also obvious is food's association with love-making as implied by the epigraph at the beginning of the novel, "to the table or to bed you must come when you are bid."

Ceremony (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko tells the story of Tayo, a young American Indian who has been a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II. The horrors of his captivity have almost eroded his will to survive. His return to the Laguna Pueblo reservation only increases his feeling of estrangement of alienation. While other returning soldiers find easy refuge in alcohol and senseless violence, Tayo searches for another kind of comfort and resolution. His quest leads him back to the Indian past and its traditions, to beliefs about witchcraft and evil, and to the ancient stories of his people. The search itself becomes a ritual, a curative ceremony that defeats despair.

Joy Luck Club (1989) by Amy Tan is a fascinating look into the lives of Chinese women who have immigrated to the United States. Written as a collection of vignettes told in first person, four mothers and their four daughters share memories of the joys and sorrows of their lives. Each story gives a glimpse into Chinese culture and heritage, including festivals, marriage ceremonies, foods, clothing, and children. The reader is also introduced to the social rules and expectations of the traditional Chinese woman. In spite of this strict upbringing, each woman or girl has a nature and spirit that enables her to find unique ways to cope with life's individual spirits and the basis of survival through hard times.

My Grandmother Smoked Cigars (1977) by Sabine R. Ulibarri provides a dimension of the preservation of Hispanic culture in the context of rural New Mexico society, where one finds some of the most traditional aspects of Spanish-speaking life maintained. Ulibarri writes of the powerful personality of

his grandmother, providing a maternalist interpretation of Hispanic culture as against the aggressive power structures of Anglo society.