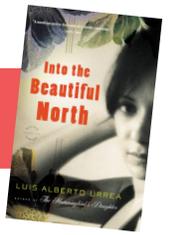


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Source: <http://www.neabigread.org/>



Luis Alberto Urrea (b. 1955)

Growing up in Tijuana and San Diego with an American mother and Mexican father, Luis Alberto Urrea was familiar with the complex realities of the U.S.-Mexico border from an early age.

The dualism in his personal history is reflected in a prolific and celebrated literary career. Urrea writes stories that portray reality on both sides of the border, creating humanizing portraits of immigrants as well as their adversaries. As the author of 14 books, including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and memoir, Urrea is a major figure in Latino literature and a member of the Latino Literature Hall of Fame. His work transcends media stereotypes and contemporary immigration disputes, revealing the border as a place of connection as well as divide. “The Mexican border is a metaphor,” he noted in a 2011 interview with *Coloradan* magazine. “Borders everywhere are a symbol of what divides us. That’s what interests me.”

Urrea was born in a poor neighborhood in Tijuana. He inherited a rich legacy of family and cultural lore and a love of storytelling from his extended family, explored extensively in his literary work.

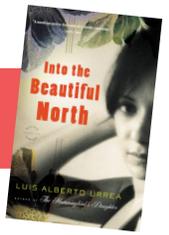
When Urrea was five, his parents moved across the border to San Diego. From an early age, he moved easily between the two cultures. In a 2011 interview with the *San Diego Reader* Urrea said, “To me, Tijuana and San Diego were just inseparable; they were two sides of the same thing.”

Urrea attended high school in San Diego, where he and a cohort of artistic friends pursued burgeoning interests in poetry, drama, and rock music.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Luis Alberto Urrea (b. 1955)

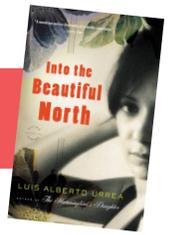
In the late 1970s, shortly after graduating from the University of California, San Diego, Urrea rediscovered Tijuana. A friend introduced him to “Pastor von” of Clairemont Emmanuel Baptist Church in San Diego, a dynamic individual known for leading relief work projects in Tijuana’s massive garbage dump. One of Urrea’s first jobs as a relief worker was to wash the feet of the garbage pickers.

Although he grew up a few miles from the site, Urrea was astonished to discover the dump, a literal mountain of garbage, that provides a meager source of income to a large community of garbage pickers and orphaned children. The experience was profound for Urrea, who continued to volunteer at the site for years and has since become a voice for the inhabitants of the dump.

In the early 1980s, Urrea set off in a new direction. With the help of a former professor, he secured a position at Harvard, where he taught expository writing from 1982 to 1990. He also held teaching positions at Massachusetts Bay Community College and the University of Colorado.

In 1997, Urrea received an MFA from University of Colorado in Boulder, and today he is a professor of creative writing at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He lives with his family in Naperville, Illinois.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF URREA



Source: <http://www.neabigread.org/>



1950s

- **1951:** The Braceros program, a series of U.S. laws and agreements created in the 1940s, prompts the importation of thousands of temporary Mexican laborers.
- **1954:** A backlash against illegal immigration prompts “Operation Wetback,” a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service initiative to remove immigrants who have entered the country illegally. Tens of thousands are deported.
- **1955:** Urrea is born in Tijuana, Mexico, to a Mexican father and American mother.
- **1956:** Immigration peaks when nearly half a million laborers enter the U.S.

1960s

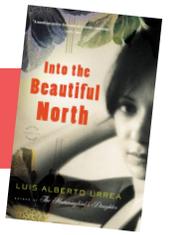
- **1960:** Latinos are recognized as a significant voting bloc.
The Chicano movement, an art and social justice movement, gains strength.
Urrea’s parents move from Tijuana to San Diego.
- **1962:** César Chávez organizes the National Farm Workers Association in California.

1970s

- Throughout the 1970s, maquiladoras, assembly plants owned by U.S. companies, proliferate along the border, fueled by the cheap cost of labor.
- **1974:** The Mexican American Women’s National Association is established in Washington, DC, to advance the status of Mexican-American women.

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF URREA



Source: <http://www.neabigread.org/>

1970s continued

- **1976:** The U.S. Congress imposes a limit of 20,000 visas per country per year in the western hemisphere; the number of Mexican immigrants surpasses the limit by 40,000.
- **1978:** Urrea graduates from the University of California, San Diego.

1980s

- **1982:** The repeated devaluation of the peso compels more laborers to seek jobs in the U.S.
- **1982-85:** Urrea teaches expository writing at Harvard.
- **1986:** The Immigration Reform and Control Act grants amnesty to people working in the U.S. illegally. Nearly 3 million people gain legal status.

1990s

- **1994:** The North American Free Trade Agreement is established to increase trade among Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.
- **1997:** President Bill Clinton promises Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo that he will discourage mass deportation under the U.S. immigration policy.
- **1999:** Urrea is awarded the American Book Award for his memoir, *Nobody's Son: Notes from an American Life*.

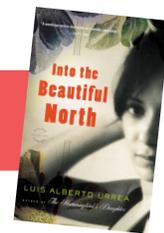
2000s

- **2004:** The Border Patrol expands dramatically in the wake of 9/11. Ten thousand new agents are authorized under the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act.
- **2005:** Urrea's book-length investigation of a tragic 2001 border crossing, *The Devil's Highway*, is named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.
- **2012:** Mexican President Felipe Calderón launches an offensive against the drug cartels.
- *The Devil's Highway* is removed from Tucson classrooms after the school district's Mexican-American Studies Program is declared illegal by Arizona in 2010. A federal judge orders a reversal and implementation of culturally relevant courses in 2013.



THE BORDER

Source: <http://www.neabigread.org/>



Until late in the twentieth century, much of the 2,000-mile U.S.–Mexico border was a lively, multicultural, even symbiotic region. Though the borderland is best known for the harsh deserts of southern California and Arizona, it also encompasses forests, mountains, and wildlife refuges. Originally, barriers between the two countries were designed merely to separate herds of cattle. The border has been altered several times, either due to the natural movement of the Rio Grande or military conflicts, which resulted in the transfer to the U.S. of five entire states (Arizona, California, Texas, Utah, and Nevada) and parts of others—half the original land of Mexico.

The prevention of immigration grew into a significant political issue around 1990. The U.S. economy had grown dependent on Mexican workers for much of the harvesting of its produce and a substantial portion of its service work in childcare, landscaping, construction, and food service, and many Mexicans relied on financial support from family members working in the U.S. As the U.S. struggled with rising unemployment and threats from external forces such as Al Qaeda after 9/11, concern about border security increased.

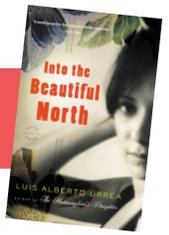
Crossing the border has become more difficult in recent years with much-enhanced American enforcement, which now includes more than 21,000 patrol agents who utilize an increasingly sophisticated array of technological equipment to prevent and apprehend immigrants. Those efforts, supported by \$90 billion in U.S. federal funding to bolster fences, personnel, and equipment, have resulted in the apprehension of more than 18 million people since 1990, with a peak number of 1.6 million apprehensions in 2000. Still, many Mexicans (and citizens of other countries in Central and South America) pay “coyotes,” people willing to smuggle immigrants into the U.S., a fee that buys three or more attempts at crossing into the U.S. Many of these attempts are successful, with more than 11 million Mexicans currently living illegally in the U.S.

The decline of the U.S. wage economy since 2007 and increased border security efforts caused the net migration from Mexico to the U.S. to fall dramatically. But the challenges of economic disparity, tensions over illegal drugs flowing into the U.S., and guns flowing south into the hands of powerful Mexican gangs are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. As Urrea suggests in *Into the Beautiful North*, much remains to be resolved. Until then, the border crossings—successful or not—will continue.



SELECTED WORKS BY URREA

Source: <http://www.neabigread.org/>



Novels

- *In Search of Snow*, 1999
- *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, 2005
- *Into the Beautiful North*, 2009
- *Queen of America*, 2011

Nonfiction

- *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*, 1993
- *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, 1996
- *The Devil's Highway*, 2004

Poetry

- *Vatos*, 2000
- *Tijuana Book of Dead*, 2015

Short Stories

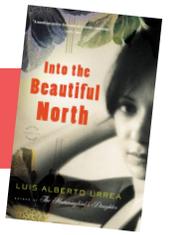
- *Six Kinds of Sky*, 2002
- *Mr. Mendoza's Paintbrush*, 2010
- *The Water Museum*, 2015

Memoirs

- *Nobody's Son: Notes from an American Life*, 2002

Books Similar to *Into the Beautiful North*

- Malin Alegria's *Sofi Mendoza's Guide to Getting Lost in Mexico*, 2008
- Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, 1991
- Reyna Grande's *Across a Hundred Mountains*, 2006
- Helen Thorpe's *Just Like Us: The True Story of Four Mexican Girls Coming of Age in America*, 2009



Source: <http://www.neabigread.org/>

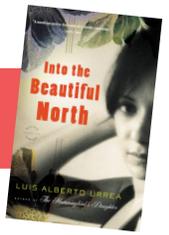
Here are questions to get your group talking.

1. In the novel, Nayeli and her friends go north—but not to join the ranks of immigrants looking for a better life. What is their mission?
2. Though the border seems far away from Tres Camarones, its influence seems closer than ever before. What forces are driving change in Tres Camarones? What are some examples of traditional aspects of life in Tres Camarones that are affected by border politics?
3. How does the author portray intergenerational relationships among the characters? How do different generations interact in the novel and what do they offer or teach each other?
4. Many people (including Nayeli and her friends) have never seen a place like the Tijuana garbage dump. How does Urrea use descriptive language to help the reader visualize and interpret the significance of this sight?
5. Urrea often takes a comic approach to tragedy. Does this approach enhance or diminish the emotional impact of events in the novel?
6. Urrea's border is a many-layered symbol, holding multiple meanings, cultural subtleties, and contradictions. In addition to the literal U.S.–Mexico border, what other types of borders or boundaries do the characters experience?
7. Urrea underlines the novel's connection to other classic quest narratives by paying homage to the classic film *The Magnificent Seven*. The author creates his own interpretation of the quest narrative, subverting traditional themes and roles. How does he create a fresh approach to the classic hero's tale?
8. How do Nayeli's experiences in Kankakee differ from her expectations? Why do you think she leaves Kankakee without confronting her father? Do you agree with her decision?
9. Did any scene, character, or event in the novel surprise you or change your attitude toward U.S.–Mexico border relations?
10. Urrea has often described the novel as “a love letter to the United States.” Do you agree? How is this love conveyed in the novel? Could the novel also be considered a “love letter” to Mexico?

Continued on other side

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Source: <http://www.neabigread.org/>



More questions to get your group talking.

11. Language and dialect play an integral role in the novel's style. Spanish words and phonetic spellings are laced throughout, and Spanglish and slang are used on both sides of the border. What does Urrea achieve by mixing language in this way? What does such usage say about the ability of language to bridge—or fail to bridge—cultural gaps?
12. *Into the Beautiful North* is divided into two parts—Sur and Norte. References to American pop culture abound in the first half as Nayeli and her friends speak of life across the border with unwavering certainty. Where do their ideas of America come from? How does the reality of their time in the U.S. compare to their initial ideas of it? Are they surprised or disappointed?
13. Nayeli tells García-García, “Perhaps it is time for a new kind of femininity?” What does she mean? Given the homage to *The Magnificent Seven* and *Seven Samurai* in the novel, how has Urrea played with gender stereotypes?
14. What do you make of the overwhelming turnout produced by Aunt Irma's interviews? Why do so many men want to return to Mexico? Does this strike you as ironic?