

## LUIS URREA, *INTO THE BEAUTIFUL NORTH*

The novel *Into the Beautiful North* draws its inspiration, in part from the films *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Seven Samurai*. Students could compare the novel to the films.

Use the reading guide below (adapted from Pacific Lutheran University to discuss the novel. Form students into D2L discussion groups so that they can discuss at least one question on-line:

### DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR LUIS ALBERTO URREA'S INTO THE BEAUTIFUL NORTH<sup>1</sup>

Below you will find the discussion questions for *Into the Beautiful North*. As you read, prepare for class discussion by making notes to respond to the questions in this guide. Also note any questions that you might have, for if you have a question, chances are others have the same one. There is Mexican street slang and Spanglish in the novel. You might find [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com) to be a helpful (although sometimes vulgar, even repugnant) resource. If you have friends in class, consider getting together to read the assignments at the same time in the UC or the library. *Being prepared for class discussion is not optional; it is imperative.*

#### Chapters 1-3

1. As you read the first three chapters, make a list of the characters you have met thus far and quickly record your impressions about each of them as they have been portrayed. When we finish the novel, we will use this list to think about how our impression of them has changed.
2. At the start of the novel, the narrator paints a picture of a town that resists change and is threatened by crime. How would you describe the narrator's attitude towards the people of Tres Camarones? Sympathetic? Mocking? Both? What in the text leads you to think this?
3. Irma points out what everyone but Nayeli seems to have realized, that most of the men have gone "off to the beautiful north" (31). This happens during a chapter with a depiction of Tres Camarones as literally beautiful, when they go crabbing, which is like going to "heaven" (31). The townspeople have a range of assumptions about the North, just as people in the U.S. do about Mexico. As you read on, think about what the title of the book might mean.

#### Chapters 4-5

1. According to the vegetable merchant, NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, Canada, and the USA) has led to an increase in bean prices because of how commodities are moved around. Why would Urrea bring up this international trade agreement in this novel? (36)
2. What was your response to Irma's attitude towards poor people and non-Mexican immigrants?
3. What is your impression of the novel so far? Do you have a favorite quote? A favorite character? What specific or general questions about the novel do you have so far?

#### Chapters 6-9

1. Nayeli declares that perhaps "it is time for a new kind of femininity" (42). From what you have seen so far, what can you say about this story's attitude towards male and female roles?
2. By the end of Chapter Eight we begin to get some indication that there will be danger involved in this journey (73). Based upon your present understanding about the experiences of immigrants coming to the United States unofficially, together with the tone of the story thus far, what are your expectations for the type of experience they might have?

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<sup>1</sup> Questions taken or adapted from the "Reading Companion & Discussion Guide" to *Into the Beautiful North* developed by Pacific Lutheran University, 2012 for the freshman common reading program.

### Chapters 10-12

1. What are the motives that drive the different characters to go North or to support the journey North?
2. During the trip to the border, our travelers face a number of dangers. When do these feel realistic and when do they seem more like something highly stylized (or presented in a way that draws attention to the style of the description or images) like *The Magnificent Seven*? What reasons might there be for Urrea to depict violence realistically or in a stylized way? What stages of the hero(ine)'s journey do you see?

### Chapters 13-15

1. How did you react to the scenes in the dump and the people living there? Sympathy? Disgust? Both? Does it surprise you to learn that people survive in such situations? Can you see yourself accepting their hospitality? What connections do you see between the dump and the reading from *Across the Wire*?
2. Does the characters' crossing into the U.S. seem easy or difficult to you? What is the character Atómiko's effect on this aspect of the story? Does Atómiko remind you of any of the characters from *The Magnificent Seven*? Why or why not?
3. Tacho tells of their epic plan to Atómiko, who is tickled by the irony of sneaking Mexicans back to Mexico. It reminds him of Ronin, which refers to a samurai with no master, and could refer to any number of movies or comics that use that recognizable type of character (127-8). What does Urrea achieve by pointing out the similarities between his own novel and these other types of stories?

### Chapters 16-18

1. We see U.S. Border Patrol officers beat up a boy (152). How is the immigration policy of the US portrayed?
2. How does the perspective of Agent Arnold Davis contribute to the story? The narrator draws attention to his race by having Nayeli compare her color to his (155). Does his race matter and, if so, how? By contrast, do we get the sense that race matters in *Tres Camarones*?

### Chapters 19-24

1. In these chapters, our characters get their introduction to the U.S and see Missionary Matt again. In what ways *is this* and *is this not* "the beautiful north" they were expecting (or you were expecting for them as a reader)? Have your expectations for the remainder of the novel changed?
2. What elements of the hero(ine)'s journey have you seen so far? Can you determine if there is just one hero(ine)? More than one? Why?

### Chapters 25-27

1. The narrator gives us more information about the romance between Irma and Chava. How does this change your perception of Irma? What do you think of Chava at this point?
2. Again, we are reminded that this is a story that works in relation to other stories when Matt admits, "he was loving this whole story.... It was like falling into one of the books he'd been reading before he dropped out of college to go to Mex." What has shaped the Mexican characters' impression of what the U.S. is like? If you have never been to Mexico, when you think about your impressions of what Mexico is like, can you trace where those ideas came from? (229).
3. Tacho learns from Rigoberto that going North in a BMW is much different than trying to cross by foot (231). What larger message does this comic understatement carry?
4. How does Urrea depict homosexuality?
5. Reflect the elements of the hero(ine)'s journey. Are your initial assignments changed at all? If so, why?

### Chapters 28-Epilogue

1. In Carla's apartment, the narrator gives us a very different picture of Missionary Matt than that held by the main characters (236-9). How does what Missionary Matt says and does impact the larger story?
2. The episode in the grocery store and the Battle of Camp Guadalupe give us a bleak picture of the migrant experience in the U.S. There are realistic and stylized aspects of these scenes. Which do you think are which? Why?
3. What is Urrea trying to accomplish with the inclusion of the encounter with white supremacists? How do these villains compare to the villains in Tijuana?



4. Nayeli and Tacho promise to take the long way to Kankakee and see a lot of things on the way. Select some examples of places, landscapes, and people that they encounter and experience, and describe how these broaden their view of the U.S. and our view of the migrant experience.
5. It turns out that many men want to return to Mexico. Did this surprise you? Why or why not? Why doesn't Nayeli talk to her father? Would you have made the same decision? Why or why not? What does Kankakee symbolize in the story? How is it different from Tres Camarones?
6. Were you satisfied by the conclusion? Is this a happy ending?
7. Consider the major characters in the novel. Who has taken the hero(ine)'s journey? Is there more than one hero(ine)? Has your idea about which character can be considered a hero(ine) changed? How?

#### Additional Classroom Assignment Ideas:

Students may choose to research aspects of contemporary immigration issues, including:

- Unaccompanied minors at the Texas-Mexico border
- The responsibilities of U.S. Border Patrol Agents