Reading Companion and Discussion Guide

Common Reading Program 2012

Pacific Lutheran University

Featuring:

Into the Beautiful North

by Luis Alberto Urrea

---FACULTY/STAFF EDITION---

IMPORTANT THEMES IN LUIS ALBERTO URREA'S *INTO THE BEAUTIFUL NORTH*

(This discussion of themes is not in the student guide.)

This novel tells the story of a small group of young people from a small, coastal town in Mexico that has lost most of its male population to jobs in "The North." Nayeli and her friends travel without documentation into the United States in order to find and bring back some men with military or police training to repopulate her town and protect it from gangsters. This plot allows an interesting perspective on the complicated, longstanding, and ever-changing economic and social relationships between governments, economic interests, and citizens in the United States and Mexico. Perhaps the most headline-grabbing issue of the book is migration and the question of "illegal" immigration; however, it also explores other ways the shape of the U.S.-Mexican relationship impacts the border itself and far-flung areas within the countries in terms of family, civic institutions, economy, criminality, ecology, and the rhythms and habits of daily life.

Rather than attempt to be comprehensive, this guide provides a brief discussion of hospitality, attitudes towards others, change, and empowerment. These themes seem especially significant to the objectives of our program and the experience of incoming students. The questions that follow cover more conceptual ground.

1. Hospitality and hostility.
   a. Right away, we are introduced to the menacing gangster-visitors, we learn of how Nayeli's community received the missionaries they had hosted, and we see that community-leader Irma is hostile towards non-Mexican migrants. When Nayeli and her friends travel, they are given refuge in a garbage dump by Dona Araceli and Don Porfirio and then taken under the protection of Atomiko. The group is confronted by brutality and kindness from military and border agents. Rigoberto demonstrates hospitality towards Tacho. Missionary Matt lets Nayeli and friends stay, but we learn his attitudes do not match the best expectations we might have of a former Christian missionary. The band encounters neo-Nazis and nativists of Mexican descent ("Speak English!"). Finally, Nayeli arrives in Kankakee, an American town that has chosen to be hospitable to migrants and immigrants.
   b. Students may have a wide range of attitudes towards issues of migration and borders, ranging from "*We should be kind to everyone*" and "*We need the workers*" to "*We need to close the borders*" and "*Illegals are breaking the law and the Rule of Law is what matters*." Possible responses to the book will range from "*See, everyone wants to keep their land to themselves, so why shouldn't we?*" to "*Kankakee shows the ideal way we should be treating this issue by demonstrating hospitality.*" Is there a theme of hospitality in PLU's mission statement, including its commitment to "care for other people, for their communities, and for the earth"?
2. Attitudes Towards and Ideas about Others.
   a. Borders and fences don't just separate countries; they separate people into "us and them." The title *Into the Beautiful North* immediately raises the issue of the Mexicans' belief in the United States as a land of opportunity, which turns out to be a mixed bag of beautiful landscape, strip malls, generosity, brutality, hope, and hucksterism. At one point, Tacho exclaims, "It is all a cruel illusion." People in the North, of course, also have insufficiently complex views of Mexico. Equally important to this theme are issues of race, gender, sex, and sexuality. For instance, the gay character of Tacho encounters taunting from the gangsters and is assaulted. Some might even find Urrea's depiction of Tacho to be stereotyping, even though it is largely sympathetic. Nayeli is forced to rethink the meaning of her brown skin as she travels North and different ideas about race assert themselves. Irma and Nayeli challenge their town's ideas about gender, but some may find the treatment

of sex and gender in the novel troubling in some places, as well. In perhaps one of the most interesting passages, Urrea confronts us with garbage-camp dwellers, inviting us to think about our ideas about and our attitudes towards the homeless and squatters.

b. One goal of the Common Reading is to "initiate student understanding of differences." PLU will give some students their first significant experience interacting closely with students who have different class and ethnic backgrounds, who are openly gay or lesbian, and who express radically different religious or political viewpoints. The Common Reading provides an early opportunity to model a mature and respectful discussion of these issues.

3. Change and Resistance to Change
   a. In Tres Camarones and Kankakee, Urrea provides two towns as opposites in terms of their attitudes towards change. While we also get a discussion of NAFTA and the negative effects of capitalism on Mexico, the beginning of the novel arguably lays some of the blame for Tres Camarones's poor economic conditions and loss of male population on its willful backwardness, its resistance to change. This is a town that says "adios" rather than "hola" as its greeting. Kankakee, by contrast, has opened its arms to the demographic changes it has undergone and seems to have benefitted from this openness to the future. We also have scenes which suggest denial of change in the U.S., such as in Camp Guadalupe, where migrant laborers live precariously because, while the agricultural system has come to depend on them, they have not been given a place to live decently.
   b. Students coming to PLU will also be experiencing change. Some they will welcome—like new freedoms and new challenges—but all will require adjustment, providing ample opportunities for mistakes. This theme in the novel may provide an opportunity to invite reflection about students' expectations regarding this transition they are undergoing.
4. Empowerment
   a. A lot of troubling things happen in this novel, but it is also suffused with optimism by how various "underdogs" take agency in their own lives as individuals and communities. Irma becomes mayor. Nayeli calls for a new kind of femininity. Tacho gets to go to a gay bar and meet Rigoberto. Kankakee and Tres Camarones both find active, positive ways of responding to demographic changes. Migrants dissatisfied with their lives in the United States return home to Mexico to rebuild their lives in Tres Camarones.
   b. The most successful students take responsibility for their own educations. Perhaps this theme provides an early opportunity to raise this issue of self-empowerment with students.

READING QUESTIONS (These have also been shared with the students.)

Questions often guide our thinking even when we are not aware of it. When reading for pleasure, you may not be conscious of questions raised by the text or intentionally use questions to analyze the literature. In an academic setting, groups discuss texts together by sharing questions and the ideas those questions bring into focus. Questions help readers recognize and explore important themes and connect the literature to experience.

As you read *Into the Beautiful North* this summer, we encourage you to use this reading companion to assist you in thinking deeply about the book. This is not an assignment that you will turn in; rather, it serves as a resource to support you in preparing for the small group discussion conversation you will have with a faculty member and your peers. **Some of these questions may mean more to you than others. Concentrate on the ones that make the most sense to you. You can use this resource to take notes, organize your thinking, and write down any additional questions that come up that you would like to discuss with your new PLU community during Orientation.**

CHAPTERS 1-3

1. 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?

2. 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.

3. When you get to the end of Chapter Three (32), 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 you finish the novel, come back and think about how your impression of them has changed**.**

4. "People in Tres Camarones didn't say hello, they said good-bye." Why do you think this might be? (19)

CHAPTERS 4-5

5. According to the vegetable merchant, NAFTA has led to an increase in bean prices because of how commodities are moved around. What is NAFTA? Why would Urrea bring it up in this story? (36)

6. What was your response to Irma's attitude towards poor people and non-Mexican immigrants?

7. What other specific or general questions about the novel do you have so far? Keep recording questions and thoughts that you have as they come up.

CHAPTERS 6-8

8. 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?

9. The movie *The Magnificent Seven* (and by extension, *The Seven Samurai*) inspires Nayeli's quest. Consider watching or researching these films. How else might they be reflected in this story?

10. 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?

CHAPTERS 9-12

11. What are the motives that drive the different characters to go North or to support the journey North?

12. 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* or some other western you've seen? What reasons might there be for Urrea to depict violence realistically or in a stylized way?

13. We get a lesson from Yolo on p. 105. Did you take this as a message from Urrea, the author—in other words as part of the book's message? Or is this just Yolo's ideas about capitalism? Either way, what is the importance to the story of these ideas about the U.S.-Mexican border and capitalism?

CHAPTERS 13-15

14. 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?

15. 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?

16. 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 16-17

17. We see migra agents beat up a boy (152). How is the immigration policy of the US portrayed?

18. 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 18-22

19. 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?

20. What new specific or general questions can you generate at this point about the story?

CHAPTERS 23-24

21. 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?

22. 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).

23. 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?

24. How does Urrea depict homosexuality?

CHAPTERS 25-26

25. 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?

26. 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 are which?

27. The number 88 stands for the eighth letter of the alphabet given twice, which signifies "Heil Hitler." What is Urrea trying to accomplish with the inclusion of the encounter with these white supremacists? How do these villains compare to the villains in Tijuana?

CHAPTERS 27-33

28. 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?

29. It turns out that many men want to return to Mexico. Did this surprise you? Why or why not?

CHAPTERS 34-EPILOGUE

30. Why doesn't Nayeli talk to her father?

31. What does the novel's ending suggest about the impact of immigration, globalization, free-trade on such longstanding social structures as the family?

32. What does Kankakee symbolize in the story? How is it different from Tres Camarones?

]

33. Were you satisfied by the conclusion? Is this a happy ending?

34. Return to the questions you asked yourself earlier in the novel. Do you have possible answers to those questions now that you have finished the book? Write a paragraph or more about your response to the book in general that takes those questions and answers into account. What new questions do you have now that you have completed the novel?