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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Like miners digging for precious metal, novelists often “mine” their personal histories for compelling story ideas and characters. 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 border from an early age. He has said that the idea for the novel, in part, came from his own history. A branch of the author’s family resides in Sinaloa, which resembles the fictional village of Tres Camarones, where many of the novel’s memorable characters reside. Urrea actually had an uncle who owned a tropical movie theater much like the memorable Cinema Pedro Infante, and a “terrifying” Aunt Irma. Today, Urrea is an acclaimed author and creative writing professor at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Whether his subject is Mexico or the Midwest, he often incorporates the people and places he encounters into his fiction.

Discussion Activities

Provide the class with inexpensive composition books to serve as reader’s journals for The Big Read project.

Play the *Into the Beautiful North* Audio Guide and have students take notes in their journals as they listen. Ask them to pay special attention to any biographical details about the author that emerge in the program.

As a group, make a list of all of the biographical details about the author that the students gathered from the Audio Guide. Discuss how biographical material and an author’s skills of invention are combined to create a work of fiction. Why do authors frequently include elements of their own personal history in their works?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write 5–10 defining biographical details about their lives, family, and/or community that they might consider exploring further in a short story or novel.

Homework

Assign Chapters 1–5. In their reader’s journals, ask students to make a list of the names of the characters they encounter in the first five chapters and for each, list one or two distinguishing details or characteristics. On “crab day” Nayeli and Yolo come to a sudden realization. What is it?

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Into the Beautiful North explores the multi-dimensional world of border culture. Urrea depicts the U.S.–Mexico border as a unique confluence of nationalities, ethnic identity, languages, and socio-economic classes. All of them flow together to create a localized, multi-layered society. In Urrea’s border world, characters come into contact with tensions that arise from many kinds of difference, but they also benefit from these juxtapositions. Urrea explores dramatically different micro-cultures within the border world, from the residents of the Tijuana garbage dump to the upscale neighborhoods of San Diego, and reveals that the distance between them is not as great as one might initially imagine.

Discussion Activities

In the first three chapters, the Mexican village of Tres Camarones is affected by a number of forces that challenge the traditional way of life. Though the border seems far away from this rural village, economic realities have brought its influences closer to home than ever before. Discuss the following questions:

- What are some examples of the old ways or traditional aspects of life in Tres Camarones?
- What are some examples of changing times in Tres Camarones?
- What forces (economic, technological, cultural) are driving change in Tres Camarones?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write short essays exploring how the global culture of the Internet has changed the lives of the young characters in the novel. What do they know about the world that they might not have encountered in a pre-Internet world? How has this knowledge transformed them?

Homework

Assign Chapters 6–9. In their journals, ask students to address:

- Who is Don Pepe?
- Describe the object Nayeli keeps to remind herself of him.
- What movie inspires Nayeli’s decision to lead a trip to “Los Yunaites”?
- What is her mission? Why is it necessary?

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Luis Alberto Urrea tells the story of *Into the Beautiful North* through a select group of characters. This narrative point of view, called third-person limited or third-person multiple, enables Urrea to present multiple perspectives on the action and to exploit the personalities of many memorable characters. At times Urrea employs a third-person omniscient point of view, distancing the story from specific individuals to set a scene or provide a broader perspective. This loose narrative strategy seems well suited to a sweeping story that chronicles a close-knit group of characters who set out on a journey together, but encounter distinctly different personal challenges. While the narrative lens often focuses on Nayeli, the narration also follows others.



Discussion Activities

Have students break into small groups to reread and discuss the narrative strategies used in Chapter 7.



Writing Exercise

In their reader's journals, ask students to respond to the following questions: Does the chapter contain multiple points of view? Are there instances when readers are "inside the heads" of specific characters? How do the author's narrative strategies contribute to the story?



Homework

Assign Chapters 10–14. In their journals, ask students to explore why, out of all of the characters, the author chooses Nayeli as the protagonist of the novel. Is this a wise narrative strategy? Why or why not?

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

Many novels, such as J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, present the world through the eyes of a single protagonist. In this novel, Nayeli is clearly the chief protagonist, yet *Into the Beautiful North* is very much a “buddy” novel. Urrea endows his large cast of characters with individuality through well-developed personalities, aspirations, and distinct quirks. While Nayeli has the vision to “bring back the men” in order to save the village, the project is deeply communal. As individuals, Nayeli, Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi project distinct personalities, but it is a sense of camaraderie and community spirit that ultimately helps them accomplish their goal. By endowing the characters with strong bonds to each other and to Tres Camarones, Urrea invites the reader to invest not only in the individual characters, but in their community and shared culture.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into two groups and ask them to review the characters and their roles in the novel.

Ask Group One to discuss and report on the following questions: What are some ways Urrea creates individuality in his characters? What is the role of dialogue in character development? How does the author portray intergenerational relationships between characters in the novel?

Ask Group Two to discuss and report on the following questions: In Chapters 8–10, Nayeli, Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi embark on a harrowing bus trip to the border. What challenges do they face along the way? What aspects of their individual characters are revealed? What roles do the characters play in their relationships with each other? (Some suggested roles might be parent-child, leader-follower, optimist-pessimist.)

Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose any major character in the novel or assign characters if you prefer. Have the students imagine what it would be like if that character suddenly moved to their hometown, city, or community. Utilizing everything they know about the character, ask them to write a “Day in the Life” essay about the character. Where would the character live, work, or go to school? What sports or activities would he or she engage in? Where would they shop for clothes? What sort of friends would the character have? What aspects of life in the community would the character find interesting, surprising, frightening, or funny?

Homework

Assign Chapters 15–19. In their journals, ask the students to identify some examples of figurative language (sights, sounds, smells, touch; similes and metaphors) that they encounter in their reading.

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Urrea's use of figurative language is often associated with nature. He employs imagery to enhance his descriptions of the natural world. Through strategic use of similes and metaphors, he conveys a heightened sense of sensory experience and wonder, particularly in the scenes in which his characters encounter unknown places or predicaments.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Ask students to read and analyze the following descriptions of the Tijuana garbage dump. Identify and discuss the types of figurative language that appear in the descriptions.

“Before them a malodorous volcano of garbage rose two hundred feet or more. It was dark gray, ashen, black, and it was covered in flecks of white paper as if small snowdrifts were on its slopes.”

“The sky peeled back for a moment, and a weak ray of sunset spilled over the scene like the diseased eye of some forgetful god—the light bearing with it cold in place of heat.”

Most people (including Nayeli and company) have never seen a garbage dump of such monumental size. How does the author's use of figurative language help the reader visualize and interpret the significance of this sight?

Ask students to experiment by rewriting the author's sentences (below) in their journals without using any figurative language. Discuss and analyze the difference between the figurative and nonfigurative sentences. In what ways does figurative language contribute to these descriptions?

- “Bats twirled above them like leaves flying in a windstorm.”
- “. . .white birds exploded from the fields.”
- “Riverbeds and streambeds looked like long lines of baby powder. . .”
- “Car horns were sour brays.”
- Street kids “faded into the dark like a pack of hunting cats. . .”
- “The sun was buttery. . .”
- Garbage bags “. . .rose like ghosts.”
- “The occasional palm tree shot into the sky like a frozen firework. . .curving a bit before it fell back to the ground.”



Homework

Present options for and begin discussing final essay and/or capstone projects.

Assign Chapters 20–22. Students should note three to five key components of the plot in their journals.

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols reveal the larger ideas and forces at work in Urrea’s novel, functioning within but also beyond specific details of narrative and plot. The U.S.–Mexico border is both a literal place and a governing symbol in the novel. Ambiguous and complex, the border is open to multiple interpretations. To some it represents hope, economic opportunity, freedom, and personal gain, but to others it stands for injustice, state control, political conflict, and personal loss. In a broader sense, the border symbolizes the problems and possibilities of difference itself. Urrea’s border is a many-layered symbol, capable of holding multiple meanings, cultural subtleties, and contradictions.

Discussion Activities

Distribute Handout One: The Border: A Place of Contradictions. Read and discuss the border as a literal and symbolic place. Ask students to create two lists: one for descriptions of the border as a physical place and one for the descriptions of the border as a symbol. Compare and discuss their findings. How can one symbol encompass multiple meanings and interpretations?

Ask students to work in groups to identify additional symbols in the novel. Is Nayeli a symbol? Atómiko? Tía Irma? Tacho? Why or why not?

The author divides the novel into two sections: “Sur” and “Norte.” What do these headings symbolize?

Writing Exercise

In their reader’s journals, ask students to identify and write about another major symbol in the novel (Nayeli’s KANKAKEE postcard, Atómiko’s staff, etc.). What is the significance of the symbol? What does it contribute to the novel?

Homework

Assign Chapters 23–26. In their reader’s journals, ask students to address the following: Nayeli and her friends encounter two characters mentioned early in the novel. Who are they, and what roles do they play? Name and describe any new characters that appear in Chapters 23–26. What roles do they play?

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

By definition, a quest novel demands much of its characters: they must leave the familiarity of home, face unknown dangers, and risk their lives for the sake of others. Character development in quest novels is often achieved through the protagonist's response to a challenge or a series of escalating trials, which serve to reveal his or her essential underlying character. In Urrea's novel, the young, idealistic, and naive protagonists are on a quest to bring good men back to their village to combat drug-dealing "bandidos." Urrea does not spare his young characters the harsh realities of the journey to, and beyond, the border. They experience firsthand the pain of life on the streets of Tijuana, extreme poverty, police brutality, and fear, having entered the country illegally. Nayeli and her friends must summon alacrity, courage, and shrewdness to overcome obstacles that stand in the way of their success.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Part 1: Ask students to make a list of the major challenges or obstacles the characters face in the novel. Divide the students into four teams by major characters: Team Nayeli, Team Tacho, Team Yolo, and Team Vampi. Although the characters face most of their challenges together, ask the teams to delve deeper into their individual character's response to each challenge. What emotions do they experience? What attitudes, qualities, and resources (or lack of) do they contribute to the group response? Has the character changed in any fundamental way as a result of these challenges?

Part 2: Focusing on the same character they had been assigned earlier, ask each student to think about the character's attitudes, thoughts, and actions from the beginning of the novel through the most recent chapter they have read. In their journals, ask the students to write a letter home to a loved one in Tres Camarones from the point of view of their character. What might the character reveal to a loved one about his/her feelings at this point in the journey that he/she might not reveal to the others? The letter should express how the journey thus far has changed the character's attitudes, feelings, and thoughts.



Homework

Assign Chapters 27–31. Students should finish their letters home to Tres Camarones. In the last sentence of Chapter 31, Atómiko declares the following: "Auntie," he said, "the revolution has begun." What does he mean by this statement? Give details.

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The plot of *Into the Beautiful North* follows a classic pattern often found in quest novels. Urrea emphasizes the story's connection to other classic quest stories by paying homage to the classic film *The Magnificent Seven*. The author creates his own interpretation of the hero's journey narrative, twisting and adapting the plot to create a story that possesses ironic twists and surprising reversals.

Discussion Activity

Distribute Handout Two: The Hero's Journey. Read the handout and discuss the basic structure of the hero's journey. Ask students to share some examples of hero's journey narratives that appear in their favorite novels, TV shows, and films.

Ask students to identify some of the ways in which Urrea intentionally subverts the traditional hero's journey. Discuss the reversal of gender roles in the novel. There are multiple examples of women who play stereotypical male roles (hero, mayor) and exhibit stereotypical male attributes (bravery, toughness, the ability to lead others). What is the author communicating by altering traditional gender roles?

Writing Exercise

In the novel, Nayeli and her friends go north—but not to join the ranks of immigrants looking for a better life. Write a response to these questions: What is their mission and how does it challenge perceived expectations? What stereotypes is Urrea confronting with this plot decision?

Homework

Have students finish the novel, including the Epilogue. Remind students of due dates for essays and/or capstone projects.

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with a situation such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will be raised in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Into the Beautiful North explores complex issues that transcend the specific circumstances of the novel and connect to universal concerns. Some major themes include:

- Economic and social justice
- Multiculturalism vs. nationalism
- Migration and the plight of the immigrant in a strange land
- The courage to act vs. apathy and complacency
- Familial and romantic love and loyalty
- Change and innovation vs. tradition and conformity

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Discuss the concept of theme. Ask students to identify major themes of the novel on their own and invite them to make a group list on the board. (Help them develop their list if necessary.) Working in small groups, have the students identify and share key scenes in the novel that relate to each theme. How do various characters relate to or represent these themes? Ask students to support their thoughts with specific examples from the novel.

Ask students to share and discuss their ideas.

In their reader's journals ask students to explore how a particular theme in the novel affects their daily lives and the life of their community.



Homework

Remind students of due dates for various phases of their essays and/or capstone projects. Distribute Handout Three: The Midwesternization of 'El Norte.' Ask students to read it and answer (in writing) the following questions: Did it surprise you to know that Latinos are settling in the Midwest in large numbers? Why or why not? How does the author incorporate this migratory trend into the novel? Which of the novel's main themes relate to this trend?

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Works of fiction can illustrate the connection between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives, while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel or play is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Divide students into small groups. Drawing on their own personal experiences as readers, ask each group to create a list of the characteristics of a great book.

Ask students to support each characteristic with examples of books they have read and admired in the past. Remind the group to respect the opinions and suggestions of others—there is no single answer.

Bring the groups together and ask them to share, refine, and consolidate their ideas into a single list on the board.

Offer students ample time to discuss what they enjoyed (and didn't enjoy) about *Into the Beautiful North*. Based on the characteristics they have identified, does the novel qualify as a great book?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short book review of the novel. In 300 words or less, ask them to evaluate the successes and limitations of the novel. They should support their ideas with a quote or image from the book—or create their own original illustration. What sort of readers might like this book? Why?

Homework

Students should focus on their essay and/or capstone projects.

The Border: A Place of Contradictions

“These lands have always been here; the river of people has flowed for centuries. It is only the designation ‘border’ that is relatively new, and along with the term comes the life one lives in this ‘in-between world’ that makes us the ‘other,’ the marginalized. . .”

— Norma E. Cantu, professor of Latina/o literatures, Chicana/o literatures, border studies, folklore, women’s studies, creative writing, University of Texas at San Antonio.

A border is a literal and symbolic place where the laws, politics, values, and desires of two nations confront each other across a narrow line. The contrast often creates a third culture with its own languages, customs, and economies—the unique culture of the borderland.

The history of the U.S.–Mexico border begins with the European discovery and settlement of the New World. In pre-Columbian times the land on both sides was inhabited by people of many indigenous cultures who did not recognize a border. Over time, colonization, the Gold Rush, railroads, wars, immigration, NAFTA, drug trafficking, and many other events have shaped the culture and history of the border. Ironically, the U.S. Border Patrol was established in 1924 largely to stem the flow of Chinese immigrants illegally crossing the Mexican border to the U.S.

At the beginning of *Into the Beautiful North*, Nayeli and her companions experience the border as a threshold between the known and the unknown. Men in the novel, including Nayeli’s father, who have crossed the border have rarely or never been heard from again. Tales of hardship related to crossing and deportation are part of the lore and literature of their locale.

As Urrea’s novel illustrates, U.S. state and federal immigration laws affect millions of people in profound ways. Borders can serve as both physical and symbolic lines of demarcation, establishing stark lines of contrast between the people and nations they divide. Urrea’s characters bring a human face to illegal immigration, a topic that is frequently at the epicenter of political and social discourse between the U.S. and Mexico today.

Although many on both sides are drawn to the border for economic opportunity, it is also place of creativity and cultural opportunity, fostering the exchange of music and arts forms, new dialects, and culinary fusions. Urrea invites his readers to think of the border as more than a stark divide between nations—it is also the place where they blend.



The Hero's Journey

Star Wars. The Odyssey. Harry Potter. The Matrix. The Lord of the Rings. The Ring Cycle. Into the Beautiful North.

At first glance, *Into the Beautiful North* might not appear to have a great deal in common with this list of epic narratives. The novel is set in a familiar time and place—not an unknown solar system or the realm of Middle Earth. Alive with current social and political themes, pop culture memes, and young characters that reference music and celebrities of our day, *Into the Beautiful North* is a novel of our time.

And yet, Luis Alberto Urrea has created a story that has roots in a tradition that runs deep in world literature, the tradition of the hero's journey. American scholar Joseph Campbell described the universal hero's journey in his book *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*:

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

Like Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, and Odysseus, Nayeli and her band of loyal followers leave behind the familiar world to go in search of special knowledge and power that lie in unknown realms (outside their “comfort zones”).

Urrea pays homage to this literary tradition by patterning the novel after another classic hero's journey, an American film by John Sturges, *The Magnificent Seven*, in which peasants from a Mexican village cross the border to find gunmen to defend their village from bandits. Nayeli experiences her own call to adventure for the first time when she watches *The Magnificent Seven* in the Cine Pedro Infante movie house.

Once on the journey, all heroes face dangerous obstacles and must demonstrate courage, sacrifice, and perseverance to survive. If successful, the hero is transformed and rewarded with new knowledge and power. To complete the journey, the hero must return to the known world with these hard-won attributes and use them to restore harmony to the homeland or rescue others in distress.

Urrea gives the hero's journey a contemporary feminist twist by putting Nayeli in the hero's role. All heroes have mentors, and just as Luke Skywalker obtains his training from wizened Yoda, Nayeli is mentored by Tía Irma, the first woman mayor and bowling champion of Tres Camarones, who, in her day, had ventured over the border into the unknown and returned in triumph, bringing prestige to her village.

In the last scene of the novel, Pepino signals the triumphant return of the hero Nayeli, when he cries out from village rooftop, “Nayeli and Tacho... brought an army!”

The Midwesternization of “El Norte”

Latinos have always been part of the American landscape. To many Mexicans and Central and South Americans, “El Norte” has symbolized the hope of a better economic future. Until recently, “El Norte” primarily described the region just north of the Mexican border.

Around 1990, that began to change. The decentralization of relatively low-paying, difficult manufacturing jobs in industries like meatpacking led to the closure of big-city plants and the opening of smaller facilities throughout the South and Midwest. These jobs were unattractive to already employed residents, and small town populations were declining, thus creating a worker shortage.

Latinos found these jobs much more lucrative than what was available in their home countries. They came by the thousands to Iowa, Minnesota, Indiana, Illinois, and elsewhere. According to Sylvia R. Lazos Vargas in “‘Latina/o-ization’ of the Midwest,” they found friendly small-town cultures and an abundance of affordable housing. In the small-town Midwest, life was easier than in the

crowded cities of the Southwest. Hence, migration accelerated: from 1990 to 2000, Latino populations in agricultural states increased by as much as 393%. Some counties grew from virtually 0% Latino to 30% in just ten years.

After the meatpacking migration, other support systems—Latino produce markets, Mexican restaurants, and other services—emerged and gained strength. In Urrea’s novel, *Kankakee*, Illinois, is the adopted home of Nayeli’s father Pepe and the locus of a Latino community. Latinos are now the largest U.S. minority group, wielding increasing political clout in key Midwestern swing states.

Latinos in today’s U.S. face significant challenges, from an anti-immigrant backlash to the integration of Spanish-speaking children into public school systems, to the ultimate goal of equality in their new towns. Nonetheless, like many immigrant groups before them, Latinos are finding a home in and changing the face of “El Norte.”