

You Can Go Home Again

Luis Urrea's new book goes a-questing

INTO THE BEAUTIFUL NORTH, fiction by Luis Alberto Urrea. Little, Brown and Company, 2009. \$24.99.

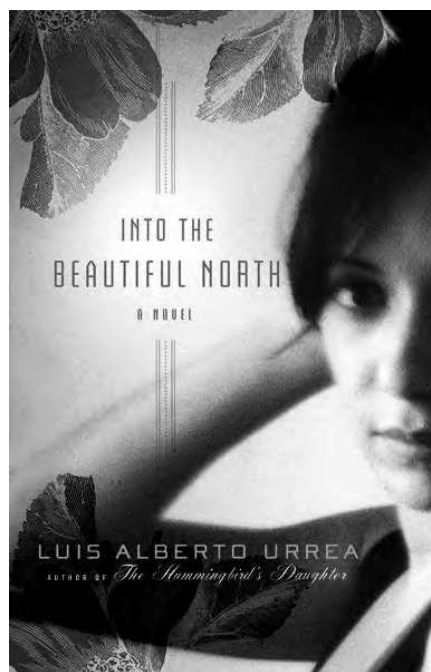
Like a movie, Luis Alberto Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North* dips in and out of scenes, cutting quickly between locations, popping in and out of its characters' minds and panning for effect in familiar ways.

That's appropriate: The book concerns a quest inspired by a movie, *The Magnificent Seven*. Nayeli, the hero of this quest, lives in the village of Tres Camarones in Sinaloa, a northwestern state in Mexico. She's 19, smart, tough, a soccer player and judo student, but she doesn't know

quite what to do with her life. She and her girls — "the notorious girlfriends," one a wanna-be vampire Goth, one a fellow soccer player — and her boss at Tres Camarones' restaurant all figure out about the same time that the village is devoid of men. They've all gone north. And now the drug dealers are moving in.

Nayeli decides to go north in search of warriors — "soldiers or cops," she says — to rid the town of the bandits. She'll bring the men back, including her father; she has a postcard from Kankakee, Ill., where he's been living for years. So she, her gay boss Tacho and her friends set off on their quest to cross the border illegally, round up a small army (she wants seven, of course) and return home. Shouldn't be too hard, right?

Urrea's book shows the vivid realities of Tijuana, the Border Patrol, drug smuggling and danger to three young women and a young gay man on the road to the U.S. — but all with a light touch, without the tragedies of his nonfiction book *The Devil's Highway* (a grim but excellent book). The Border Patrol agents who eventually hear Nayeli's tale can't believe it, nor can anyone else — she wants to take men *back into Mexico*? While Urrea gives his characters a sense of humor, he also gives them full reactions to everything



from small betrayals to the moment that Tacho yells out the name of his restaurant in a crowded immigration facility.

Urrea uses several unlikely plot devices to get his characters where he wants them to go, which only makes the book more like a movie but also slightly undercuts the tale. It's a bit of a fable, of course, just like *Magnificent Seven*, so when a former missionary loans Nayeli a van so she can go in search of her father, that's not really a shock. Oddly, the skein of believability suffers most in the Kankakee scenes — which are based on actual people in the town. And while parts of the journey stretch

out, the cross-country trek lasts only a few pages, rather like an afterthought.

But Urrea's smooth writing pulls readers right over these issues. Nayeli serves as a foil for the characters she meets (almost all of the men fall for her), but Urrea also shows her complexity and the ways she's developing her identity through all of her new experiences. Even though she's a Buffy the Vampire Slayer type with her judo and her quick wit, she can be injured physically and emotionally. She abandons parts of her project, understanding that others might be able to do the work better; she abandons some of her goals after seeing that they might have been undertaken with too much hope and not enough realism. The jacket copy calls her "irresistible," and while that's an exaggeration of PR writing, Nayeli does give Urrea a fine, funny focus for the plot.

That's not to say the author doesn't sketch out other memorable characters. The older Mexican men who can't understand young men's slang are as befuddled as the white people who don't understand Spanish (and the other way around). The book's so packed with characters, as a matter of fact, that it seems far too short. The final scene ends with a long shot, filled with the promise of more adventure to come. *Into the Beautiful North* gives a glimpse into the cost of immigration, but it finishes with a fair amount of faith in those Nayeli wants to lead into a better future.

EW

Luis Urrea reads from and signs *Into the Beautiful North* at 6 pm Friday, Oct. 2, at the Eugene Public Library.



Luis Alberto Urrea

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