



Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border

Luis Alberto Urrea , John Lueders-Booth (Photographer)

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Luis Alberto Urrea's *Across the Wire* offers a compelling and unprecedented look at what life is like for those refugees living on the Mexican side of the border—a world that is only some twenty miles from San Diego, but that few have seen. Urrea gives us a compassionate and candid account of his work as a member and "official translator" of a crew of relief workers that provided aid to the many refugees hidden just behind the flashy tourist spots of Tijuana. His account of the struggle of these people to survive amid abject poverty, unsanitary living conditions, and the legal and political chaos that reign in the Mexican borderlands explains without a doubt the reason so many are forced to make the dangerous and illegal journey "across the wire" into the United States.

More than just an expose, *Across the Wire* is a tribute to the tenacity of a people who have learned to survive against the most impossible odds, and returns to these forgotten people their pride and their identity.

Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border Details

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From Reader Review Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border for online ebook

Whitaker says

A really great book shows us how everything is great and worth to die for

Tana says

Luis Alberto Urrea gives readers a vivid description of what life is like for those living in the dirty, vermin-infested, & often violent "dompes" (garbage dumps) of Mexico. I thought I knew hardship growing up, but after reading Urrea's tales of misery, I realized my life could have been worse. I was blessed enough to be born on the "right side" of the border, a clueless Mexican American. Yes, I learned all about my culture as far as music, food, language, & holidays; but I had no idea of the suffering of many whom I considered my fellow race. While I have been aware of the suffering that goes on around the world since I was a young adolescent, I have never read such a candid, heart-breaking account of what goes on right beneath my nose. I spent my summers playing near the Rio Grande, listening to stories about Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, & my heroic great-grandfather, & traveling to Juarez for various bits of merchandise, never truly knowing what others were experiencing beyond the border. While Urrea's work was written some years ago, his words are still true today. While the stories are hard to read (sometimes stomach-wrenching), they are, I know, much harder to live. I have come away from this reading with a new found respect for the people living in such situations. I have also come away with a new understanding of politics/propaganda involved in keeping much of the world uninformed as to the gravity of the situation in Mexico. The blinders have been lifted, & I can no longer ignore what I know. All of the sudden, it doesn't matter what I'm going to wear or eat tomorrow, or where I'm sleeping tonight.

Kirk Astroth says

Another great book by Urrea about life along the border and the many sad stories of lives ruined and taken by violence and greed. Urrea is a saint for working there in Tijuana to help people. The chapter on his father's death is heart-wrenching.

Patrick O'Neil says

Mexican border towns are strange, confusing, and sometimes wonderful, and Luis Urrea takes us there. His essays in *Across the Wire*, exemplify that jumble of emotions and experiences that make up a land caught between so many different dominating factors - money, poverty, politics, and race, to name but a few. With his elegant non-judgmental style of writing Urrea portrays the residents of garbage dumps, forgotten barrios, shantytowns, and abandoned hillside houses filled with glue sniffers. Some of the chapters are sad, some are horrific, some so beautiful you want to cry - but they're always amazing in that Urrea captures the wonders of the people as they live through it all.

Kurt Reichenbaugh says

Started reading this morning and finished this afternoon. Published in the early 90's and told as a series of real stories, this book reports the lives of people living in and around Tijuana and the border between Mexico and California.

Barbara Lovejoy says

Learned about this book after reading Devil's Highway--a book by the same author. Just as the Devil's Highway tugged at my heart this one did, too.

Eavan Hooke says

Having read Urrea'S BOOK hOUSE OF ANGELS I understand where his characters come from, his family. This book is about Tijuana, Mexico and the unbearable life of the refugees living in misery and poverty. It's right across the US border and it's a different world. As I read his narratives I felt sick to my sick because of the sub human conditions that these people live in, anger at our government for the immigration policies, and ended by just wanting to cry when I read his Christmas story.

Luis Urrea was just starting out as journalist when he wrote this book. He devoted his time working with the people in his hometown of Tijuana. He has collected the plight of the displaced and shone light on their lives.

Jenny says

I had to read this for an university social work class. While full of crass language and unpleasant stories, I found it full of important information that helped me to better understand a side of immigration that Americans should know. I wouldn't want to read it again, but I will never forget some of the lessons I learned. Many of Urrea's experiences are heartbreaking.

Jerry Withers says

Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border was published in 1993 and it is a journalistic collection of narratives that were observed by the author, Luis Alberto Urrea, from 1979 to 1992 in areas near the Mexican-American border where he worked as a translator and helper for the missionaries. Luis Alberto Urrea was born in Tijuana, Mexico where he grew up and gained his interest in homeless Mexican-Americans. He attended the University of California, San Diego, and earned an undergraduate degree in writing. Continuing on, Urrea did his graduate studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder and later taught at the Expository Writing program at Harvard. Urrea tells the reader in the prologue that his work is "subjective and biased" (2). This subjectivity can often be seen within the novel. The novel has the genres of Hispanic studies and Sociology as it gives detail into the actions and reactions of people and the situations faced by Mexicans along the Mexican-American border. The purpose of the novel is to illustrate the lives of

many Mexicans living on the border and to also inform the reader about the struggles these Mexicans deal with. Urrea does these things by telling narratives from his point of view, which is most commonly as a missionary attempting to give aid to people. Specifically within the novel Urrea talks about people living in the garbage dumps near the border, a poor Mexican family who is trying to survive, young homeless boys who live together while doing whatever they can to survive, how birthdays and special events work with homeless Mexicans living on the border, how Americans interact when they visit, and the actions of various Mexican police officers.

This vast amount of information within the novel is used to educate the reader and give them a sense of what homeless Mexicans deal with every day. After reading *Across the Wire* I have found that it is worth reading in order to understand the information and learn about the lives of these people. Another reason it is worth reading is because the suspense and storytelling ability of the author keeps the reader interested and always wanting to read more. One of the only gripes I do have is that the author often acts superior and writes as though he is speaking down to the reader. We see Urrea do these things both when he's talking about the charity work he does and also when he is speaking about Von. "I was never able to reach Von's level of commitment...He slept on the floor because the majority of the world's population could not afford a bed." (28) This shows Urrea's praise for Von which gets irritating to the reader as it is seen so often. Although Von is a great humanitarian and has significantly helped the people in Mexico, Urrea's constant commendation to Von gets bothersome to the reader. A couple other aspects to the novel that may make the reader uncomfortable are the violent and graphic events and situations that the author illustrates. For obvious reasons I will not show text examples for these events but I will explain where they are (121, 145-146). Other than these few issues I enjoyed the book as it gives great depth into the lives of people and their struggles. Urrea's experiences and writing abilities help the reader to understand the issues that many homeless Mexicans face and how the actions of Americans may affect these people. Urrea writes of a time when Americans offered help to the Mexicans, "Almost five hundred toys were distributed that day. Every child who came left with a toy." (184) This is one of the many times where Urrea shows how us Americans can help homeless Mexicans and make a difference. I believe that this might encourage Americans to help and make a difference like Urrea did in the novel. One of my favorite aspects to the novel is Urrea's writing ability which engages the reader and makes the novel enjoyable to read. An example of this is when Urrea says, "One of the most beautiful views of San Diego is from the summit of a small hill in Tijuana's municipal garbage dump." (31) This example shows how he gives the reader a sense of the differences between the US and Mexico and it also shows how there are many differences even though the two countries are so close. Urrea does this by illustrating that San Diego is a beautiful place while just on the other side of the border and within sight is a disgusting garbage dump. Altogether I believe that this novel is a great read as it is both enjoyable to read and informs people of valuable information that many readers may not have even thought about before. G

Brent Morris says

Excellent memoir of the author's time in the trenches of good samaritan work for the most impoverished on the border. Though written in the early 90's, it is still very relevant today. The author has gone on to write many excellent novels and works of non-fiction since. This gives you a great sense of where he comes from and the challenges facing those navigating the nebulous border world between U.S. and Mexico.

Ian says

"The 'huddled masses' ostensibly welcomed by our Statue of Liberty are, specifically, people." -from the

introduction

Beautiful does not begin to describe this writing. For fans of Joan Didion, border town stories, words, people. My heart feels like it was gently broken during the reading of this, and when it heals back together it's going to have a slightly different shape.

Karimi says

I had to use several of the chapters in this book for a social psychology essay. I decided to read the entire book and was not disappointed. I really enjoyed Urrea's writing style. He mixes his personal experiences with in depth character analysis of the people he interacted with.

I think this book is necessary reading for anyone who lives in an American state near the border of Mexico. This book gives a unique account of the lived experiences of Latinos living in the borderlands that is much to often ignored in many Mexico-America related conversation.

I also think this is necessary reading for anyone interested in sociology, social services, global development, poverty, women's studies, chicano studies, Mexico, or human rights.

Lars Guthrie says

Since my enthusiastic reception of Urrea's 'The Hummingbird's Daughter,' my Dad has cheerfully assigned a couple of collection of essays by that author to me. It's an assignment I have cheerfully met, although I can't say reading this one was always cheerful. Just across the border in Tijuana, his home town, Urrea worked with evangelical missionaries to give aid to people living in the most severe kind of poverty--the kind of poverty we associate with India or Africa, not somewhere next to San Diego. These are the people who live in Tijuana's garbage dumps. It was sometimes hard to keep reading Urrea's portrayals of these people, unflinchingly honest about disease and decay and and violence and malnutrition. This is not to detract from his well-crafted writing, nor to deny his always respectful and dignified treatment of his subjects. It's just that the hopelessness of their situation is so depressing, and those of us who are better off seem more concerned with keeping 'aliens' out than recognizing our neighbors' suffering. There is some comic relief in an essay about a day spent with a Tijuana cop, a digression with the story of the death of Urrea's mysterious father, and a final episode of hope, when a radio station organizes the presentation of Christmas gifts to the kids of the garbage dumps.

Ken says

A timely reread. Urrea's on-the-ground report doesn't pull any punches. This one and his "The Devil's Highway" -- which I just started (another reread) -- are indispensable nonfiction accounts of what it's like to live along and cross the border. In starting last month a reread of "Across the Wire," and taking in anew Urrea's volunteer work and its impact, I was inspired to hook up with the New Sanctuary Coalition and train to do Immigrant Accompaniment. If you're looking to do more than merely rail on Facebook and/or mutter curses as it relates to Trump's inhumane immigration policies, check out this rewarding volunteer work through New Sanctuary, especially if you live in NYC: <http://www.newsanctuarynyc.org/accomp...>

Jeaninne Escallier Kato says

Though written 25 years ago, this little book stands as a huge testament to the realities of border life in Tijuana, Mexico. Even this many years later, these true stories are timely and important. If you haven't read any of Urrea's books, you are missing out on some pretty profound experiences written in almost perfect prose. I studied writing with Luis for five days at a writer's workshop in Tomales Bay, California, last fall because I wanted to glean some of his magic. Before you read any other of his amazing books, this book would be a good place to start.

Luis grew up on the mean streets of Tijuana, so when he takes you on a little journey each chapter, you feel the utter, open-wound rawness of what it's like to live in abject poverty. The beauty of these stories is that Luis also makes the reader feel the universal oneness of simply being human; and, if we scratch off the veneer of economic status, we will find something to relate to with the humans featured in this book. In today's climate of immigration reform, I think it's important for all of us to put names and places to the people many want to condemn, simply because they want to find a better life. Some of these stories may be hard to ingest, but life is messy. Bravo, Luis!

grundoon says

It was inevitable that I'd get around to this, having accidentally read the follow-up a while back. Life among the border dumps of Tijuana, vignettes of an almost unimaginable reality as recorded through the eyes of a charity worker. This is unforgettable poverty, permitted dignity, related with both compassion and objectivity.

Pickle Farmer says

A non-fiction classic. Brutal and beautiful.

Caroline says

Urrea tells stories from his time spent working as a translator for missionaries in and around the Tijuana garbage dumps. The author wasn't doing it for God, but for the people, as he got sucked into it by a charismatic man named Pastor Von:

One of Von's pep talks revolved around the unconscionable wealth in the United States. "Well," he'd say to some unsuspecting *gringo*, "you're probably not rich. You probably don't even have a television. Oh, you *do*? You have three televisions? One in each room? Wow. But surely you don't have furniture? You do? Living room furniture and beds in the bedrooms? Imagine that!

"But you don't have a floor, do you? Do you have carpets? Four walls? A roof! What do you

use for light--candles? *Lamps!* No way. Lamps.

"How about your kitchen--do you have a stove?"

He'd pick his way through the kitchen: the food, the plates and pots and pans, the refrigerator, the ice. Ice cream. Soda. Booze. The closets, the clothes in the closets. Then to the bathroom and the miracle of indoor plumbing. Whoever lived in that house suddenly felt obscenely rich."

It helps readjust our vision in this year of the 99%.

The more of Urrea's books I read, the more I can see him circling within and between his books, looking for a safe place to land his private moments of pain and joy. He tends to sneak them in near the end. Last time I checked, his talk given at UW was available in full on Youtube; it makes an interesting companion to this book.

Jan Priddy says

Brutal true stories.

This was a book I found on my shelves, a purchase from long ago. I'd meant to read it, so I did.

Mano (Leslie) says

A series of vignettes from this Tijuana born writer, shows a heartwrenching and often difficult to read portrayal of poverty and the struggle for life on the border.
