

Optional Discussion Questions for *The Devil's Highway* Convocation 2019

Did Luis Alberto Urrea, the author, say anything during the convocation lecture that you found inspiring or engaging? Confusing or controversial? What would you like to ask him? (you CAN send him questions on his Facebook page!)

At its heart, *The Devil's Highway* is the story of a journey in the hope of starting a better life. Every family in the United States arrived here from somewhere else. What is your family's story?

The Devil's Highway is the story of the U.S.-Mexico border, but it is also about many other invisible borders. Aside from the physical border itself, what other borders separate the people in this story?

What borders separate all of us as people? If these borders exist, is there any way to bridge them? Or do we need these borders?

Is Jesus Antonio Lopez Ramos, aka Mendez, the villain of the story? Did he get what he deserved?

The theme of survival may be evident for the walkers, but how does it also apply to the Border Patrol and the smugglers themselves? To what lengths would you go to feed your family?

There seems to be a theme of occult and spiritual forces behind the scenes in the Arizona desert. Are these references offered symbolically, or are these presences an actual reality?

Luis Alberto Urrea writes that some of the Yuma 14/Wellton 26 were "aliens before they ever crossed the line." What does this statement mean?

Many authors and filmmakers claim their work is "based on a true story" (or inspired by true events). Luis Urrea, however, is writing about a widely documented event under the banner of "creative nonfiction." How do you feel about his writing in this style? Do you think he approached the topic with a truly objective eye? Do you think he ever stretches the truth in the interest of better storytelling?

How does a creative nonfiction author do justice to the subject matter? What are the obligations of creative nonfiction writers to the truth of a story? What creative license do we allow them? At what point does embellishment become lie?

Does the recounting of this horrific event point to a classic "bad guy" scenario? If so, who is to blame? Mendez? The Border Patrol? The immigrants themselves? Discuss and make a case implicating the culpable party (or parties).

Now that you've started to consider some of the responsibility for the death and suffering of the victims, think about what could have been done differently. What social conditions and local policies were in place that enabled the actions of the walkers and their "guides?" What can we say about Mendez's bosses, including Don Moi and Chespiro? Can the actions of these men or the social conditions faced by the characters in the book be altered in some way? What impact, if any, would that have?

Think about the role of unemployment/underemployment/low working wages in the tragedy described in the book. How does economic hardship drive the conflict, resulting in the events described in the text? Can a clear cause-and-effect relationship be seen in the book, or is the matter less clear cut than that? Explain.

Urrea goes into great detail to chronicle the background for each member of the Yuma 14. Why? What elements were involved in their initial decisions to immigrate under dangerous and unlawful conditions? Given the choices that each man encountered, how might you have reacted in his place?

Urrea seems to present a complete appraisal of this scenario. What aspects of the story did you find especially impactful? Perhaps it was the individual descriptions of the victims, or the particular details of their journey, the moments of their rescue, the point-of-view of the Border Patrol, or even the physical description of the harsh desert environment. Which of these added most to the development of conflict? How?

What is the significance of the title of chapter 7, "A Pepsi for the Apocalypse"?

The Devil's Highway is inside the Cabeza Prieta national wildlife refuge. Individuals can travel this route on their own and even camp inside this region, although they are required to obtain a permit from the federal government. The area has wildflowers blooming in the springtime and animals such as owls, antelope, and bighorn sheep can be seen. One individual wrote about his experience camping in the wildlife refuge:

I grappled with the implications of enjoying a place while, at the very same moment, others might be struggling to survive in it. I've always found deserts, raw and elemental, to be the most existentially provocative (and ultimately satisfying) of environments; as a result of the border situation, this one inspires different kinds of questions than any other I've been in. (Benanav, April 29, 2019, *New York Times*)

What do you think about this reaction to the region described in *The Devil's Highway*? Would you want to travel and camp in this region? Why or why not?