

## “They Didn’t Have Proper Plumbing, But They Had Da Hook-Up”

Like many good works of creative nonfiction, *The Devil’s Highway* opens in-scene. Our first experience as readers is drawn from the end of the story, when five of the illegal entrants are found and rescued by the Border Patrol. By telling what these immigrants saw and felt, Urrea paints a descriptive picture of the setting. By the end of the first several pages, we are left with the dizzying feeling of being in the dry, dusty, scorching hot desert and yearning for water. Next, we are given a description of the Wellton Police Station and develop an understanding of those whose job it is to patrol the area and prevent the entrance of the illegal immigrants. The conclusion of the first of the four parts of the book, *Cutting The Drag*, is an illustration of the process of identifying and returning the deceased voyagers to Mexico for burial or burying them in Arizona if they are not claimed or identified.

*Part II: Dead Man’s Sign* shows the beginning stages of the trip and how the Mexicans were recruited for the trip. As an American, it is easy to disregard the inhumane fate that numerous illegals face in the desert by placing blame for their situation on their shoulders. It is easy to not care when one concludes that it is their own fault that they are lost in the desert and that they should not have been trying to sneak into America, where they will likely benefit from American jobs and government support. Urrea shows, however, that many of the entrants did not seek permanent residence in the United States; rather, most wanted to find work for a short while in order to save money for making improvements in their lives once they returned to Veracruz. The author is

also able to explain why many of the entrants found themselves ill-prepared for the trip through the desert: the recruiters told them it was a short, easy trip. Urrea spends much of *Part II* describing the crime families that recruit Mexicans to make the trip. He recounts the loans that the syndicates offer to the immigrants, as well as the lies they tell in order to convince more people to go. Urrea even develops temporary sympathy for the guides by pointing out that they too simply wanted to better their lives. *Part II* also includes the beginning of the trip, starting with the entrants' stays in cheap border motels where they are required to pay an additional 50 pesos per day. Finally, this section of the book concludes by describing the six stages of hyperthermia. Why Urrea decides to include this description is unknown to me, as he has already made the suffering of dehydration and hyperthermia understood by this point in the book. He has previously described the physical burning and cooking of the body under the desert sun and mentioned the dizziness, exhaustion, cracked lips, urine consumption, and blood excretion associated with dehydration, yet he spends several pages telling the reader what one sees, experiences, and thinks while dying from hyperthermia. In my opinion, Urrea loses credit with the reader in doing so. Not only is Urrea describing an event that he was not part of, but now he also endeavors to discuss an occurrence that he has never experienced. No one knows what one experiences during heat stroke because they die, so why would a reader believe Urrea when he tries to tell him or her what one feels when their body shuts down?

In *Part III: In Desolation*, the author tells the story of the remainder of the trip, describes the illegal entrants, explains their motivations for making the expedition, and

tells the story of their discovery and rescue by the Border Patrol. Urrea paints the picture of a confused group of exhausted men who aimlessly followed Mendez as he led them in zigzags and arcs away from their destination. He shows that the situation became so desperate that some members left the group in order to retrace their tracks, while others followed Mendez until he left them. The book concludes with *Part IV: Aftermath*, a 44-page conclusion that addresses the legal ramifications for Mendez, rants about other subjects with little relation, and ends in-scene once again. *Part IV* is clearly the weakest part of the book. The true story of the Wellton 26 (or 14, depending on one's perspective) is the impetus for this book's potential impact. The tragedy of these 26 human beings speaks for itself; Urrea detracts from its impact by including his personal thoughts on illegal immigrants being found dead in the trunk of cars waiting to be towed, the construction of life-saving light towers with emergency buttons, and whether illegal immigration has a positive or negative effect on the United States of America. If he found it so worth mentioning, his thoughts should have at least been labeled as an epilogue, not *Part IV: Aftermath*.

The structure of this book is of four parts, with each part containing multiple chapters and numerous parts in each chapter. Urrea uses this structure in order to talk about many topics without confusing the reader. The author jumps between topics repeatedly and spends much time in-scene. He uses a very casual style, with swear words, derogatory terms, and sentences that read easily. For example, on page 68 Urrea describes the guides by stating, "They didn't have proper plumbing, but they had da

hook-up.” He assumes no knowledge and explains almost all of the native terms that he uses, especially when using Spanish words. In this way, Urrea caters to a wide audience and is able to affect the attitudes of many different people toward Mexican illegal immigrants.

This book is very valuable because it develops compassion in the reader for people that might not otherwise receive it. Especially in this era, where the United States is fighting not only terrorism, but also financial instability and imminent recession, it is easy for many Americans to develop a hatred for illegal immigrants from Mexico. While I will not concede a personal hatred for these immigrants before reading this book, I can admit that this book has had personal significance in that it increased my compassion and understanding of illegal entrants. While I personally support the deportation of illegal immigrants as a matter of law and principle, I now have a desire to aid the humanitarian efforts to rescue illegal entrants who find themselves in danger. Many Americans believe that efforts to build rescue towers and leave water in the desert simply encourage illegal immigration, but this book shows the reader that these people are human beings in an unfortunate situation. *The Devil’s Highway* shows the misery that they will encounter if dehydration and hyperthermia set in—a misery that no one should ever know.

This book is also effective because it portrays the crime families, recruiters, and guides as the blame-worthy actors in this grim horror film of life. It is hard for me to maintain animosity toward illegal entrants when I see how criminals duped them and then abandoned them in their time of need. As Officer Friendly points out on page 33, “Nobody wanted them [the 14 dead of 26] when they were alive, and now look—

everybody wants to own them.” Because of the tragedy that the entrants befell, they now receive concern—a large part of that tragedy is the commercial society that tried to make money off of their quest, and it is important that Urrea points this out. This book is valuable because it prevents the “don’t care” attitude that Americans often develop.

*The Devil’s Highway* does, however, merit several criticisms. First of all, after all of Urrea’s research, he is still unable to provide an accurate account of the facts of the case. Although the entrants were suffering from reduced mental capacity due to dehydration and hyperthermia, it is reasonable to expect some certainty of facts after researching all of the official files and conducting interviews. As an example, Urrea made a significant point of the money that Mendez and his partner gathered from the other Mexicans before leaving “in order to go find help,” but the author was not able to specify exactly how much money was assembled. It would seem logical that any money found on Mendez when he was rescued would be the amount that was collected, so why can’t Urrea specify how much that was? I also contend that Urrea’s style was too jumpy and overly emphasized money. The great tragedy of the event was the suffering and death of human beings, not the amount of money they paid their guides or the amount of money that the rescue, health care, and burial cost America. To downplay the loss of lives as the significant event is disrespectful. Furthermore, the entire book hinted at a condescending attitude toward the Mexicans. Urrea used language that should not be used in a book aimed at understanding and compassion, even though individuals sometimes use it today. It is difficult to find specific examples other than his use of the

derogatory term “wetback,” but he lost much of my trust as I noticed the author’s subtle disrespect of the illegal immigrants throughout the book.

Urrea suffered his greatest loss of credibility, however, through his perspective. He describes the events, thoughts, and emotions as if he has personally experienced them, but as readers we know that he has not. He makes a point of telling the reader what the immigrants must have felt, even though he can only speculate in the same way the reader can. In fact, it would be more powerful if he allowed the reader to speculate on his or her own and come to his or her own understanding of the misery of the desert. As a reader I want to believe that the narrator was there and experienced this, but I simply cannot.

My final critique is that Urrea said too much during his conclusion. He did not allow the reader to think for his or her self and then he tried to spread his own views on the humanitarian efforts and economic impact of illegal Mexican immigration. Instead of allowing the impact of death to set in and make his point, he distracts the reader with anecdotes about illegal immigrants being found dead in car trunks, emergency tower construction, and an economic analysis of whether illegal immigration from Mexico has a negative effect on the United States. For this reason, I recommend having future students read only the first three parts of this book. This book is worthwhile, as it truly does increase the reader’s understanding and compassion for illegal entrants, but the experience would make a larger impact if it left the reader to his or her own thoughts after the rescue of some of the immigrants. Nothing was more powerful than finding out that several died as they were being rescued, and no other scene could leave a more lasting image in the reader’s head. The most tragic part of the story was that many came

so far just to die a little too soon. *The Devil's Highway* is an important read, but could be even more significant if it ended with *Part III*.