

Discussion Guide to The Devil's Highway by Luis Alberto Urrea
University of Florida Common Reading Program 2009

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INTRODUCTION

Using this discussion guide, you'll find themes and questions related to the 2009 Common Reading book selection. The guide is organized thematically and some questions are repeated as they fit with multiple themes. The hope is that this guide will be useful as you incorporate this book into your classes. All first-year students have a copy of *The Devil's Highway* and they are expected to read it prior to the start of their college career. Thank you for your partnership in promoting campus-wide conversations about this important and globally significant topic.

This guide can always be updated. If you develop additional questions, please send them to New Student Programs (pguest@dso.ufl.edu) and we will update the guide.

Economic

Is the economic cost to Americans of treating and saving illegal immigrants such as the Yuma 14 fair? How might this cost be handled differently?

Can you relate to the coyotes? Would you assume their position if it meant the only means of financial security for you and your family?

If you were in the same economic, personal, or social conditions as the Yuma 14 originally were, would you chance your life to enter America?

Do you think any law or body of law will discourage or prevent situations such as this without economic changes also being made?

In the recent national election, immigration issues seemed to take a "back seat," and a large focus of the national debate was on the state of the nation's economy. In what ways does illegal immigration actually affect the nation's economy? What were some of the effects of immigration pointed out by Urrea at the end of the book?

On pages 179-181 we learn about how the health care system deals with treating illegal immigrants. Either the hospital writes off the medical bills or the government pays the fees if the immigrant is taken into custody. How does this affect the healthcare system financially, and in terms of quality? Is there a better alternative way of providing healthcare to illegal immigrants?

At the end of the book, Rita Vargas comes to the conclusion that the surviving men's flight back to Veracruz had cost \$68,000. She then poses the question, "What if somebody had simply invested that amount in their villages to begin with?" (p.199) Using her suggestion, what are some possible programs or ways that money could be used to aid impoverished people in Mexico? What are some pros and cons to these programs? How would this affect American taxpayers and the issue of illegal immigration in the U.S.?

What is wrong with global political, legal, or economic systems that leads people to risk their lives to enter another country illegally?

Do you think the steep growth of cellular and wireless communication in recent years has had, or is likely to have, an effect on human smuggling?

How do you feel about the smugglers who make a profit on smuggling human beings? Do you feel that they are really helping their fellow Mexicans or their search for a more prosperous and better life or do you feel that they are strictly involved in human smuggling for the money? Would the survivors of the Wellton 26 have made it to the United States without the help of the smugglers?

Have you ever seen a worker you thought may be illegal working in agriculture, construction, domestic, food service, or other areas? How might the absence of illegal laborers affect your life? If illegal immigrants were not working in the United States, would you be willing to pay more for things such as new buildings, vegetables, or restaurant food?

Florida-related

Do you see the influence of immigration in Florida? How so?

To what extent, if any, do you believe ethnic bias or prejudice is at work in formulating Floridians' social attitudes toward those who come illegally to Florida to work here?

On page 215, Consul Flores Vizcarra says, "What kills people is the politics of stupidity that rules both sides of the border." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Try to give at least one example of shortcomings for both Mexico and the United States on the issue of illegal immigration. How does this relate to Florida?

Have you ever seen a worker you thought may be illegal working in agriculture, construction, domestic, food service, or other areas? How might the absence of illegal

laborers affect your life? If illegal immigrants were not working in the United States, would you be willing to pay more for things such as new buildings, vegetables, or restaurant food?

Historical

The area discussed in the book has not always been a U.S. - Mexico border; shortly after Mexico's independence from Spain, the area was all part of Mexico. What influence, if any, might this fact have on the point of view Mexican citizens have about the current border, the legality of crossing it, and the economic disparity between the nations on either side of the border?

What peoples have historically inhabited the border area discussed in the book? What influence, if any, might the ethnic and language history of the area have on potential border crossers?

Personal Experience/Personal Growth

Introduction to section: The hardships endured by the migrants—physical, emotional, financial, etc—might make you think about challenges and obstacles you have faced in your own life. Although the life-threatening events Urrea describes may be more extreme than the challenges you have faced, it is still possible to use those events as a way to think about your own experiences. With that in mind, consider the following questions:

The 26 men who travelled with the coyotes had to make sacrifices and in the end, some of them sacrificed their lives. What are your views on the sacrifices they made? Have you ever made a huge sacrifice in hopes of achieving a better outcome?

While walking through the desert, the group relies on their inner strengths and motivations to get them through their harsh situation. What keeps you moving? What will you rely on to get you through your coursework and the different challenges you may encounter at the University of Florida (i.e., managing school and extracurricular activities, homesickness, dropping a class, etc.)?

The book describes crossing borders between Mexico and the U.S. The borders serve as barriers, representing a daunting obstacle people must conquer to achieve better opportunities. What “borders” do you feel you have had to cross to reach your goals?

Many of the men who joined the group to walk across the border came from different backgrounds and places throughout Mexico, yet they were forced to work together if they were to survive. How does this relate to the diversity of the student body at UF? What parallels can you draw between your journey through college and their journey through the desert?

Can you relate to the coyotes? Would you assume their position if it meant the only means of financial security for you and your family?

Have you ever seen a worker you thought may be illegal working in agriculture, construction, domestic, food service, or other areas? How might the absence of illegal laborers affect your life? If illegal immigrants were not working in the United States, would you be willing to pay more for things such as new buildings, vegetables, or restaurant food?

Physical

Why did Urrea provide so much detail about the impact of the desert crossing on the bodies of migrants? What message do you think he was trying to communicate? What was the impact of his descriptions on you, as a reader?

Can you imagine the physical pain the Wellton 26 endured? How has modern medicine enabled doctors to save men in those conditions?

The desert is presented in the book as a formidable barrier. Which of its physical qualities do you think are the most challenging to the human body? How, if at all, might people overcome them? What types of barriers do immigrants to the United States from other nations face?

Should the construction of lifesaving towers and other aids to the illegal immigrants be permitted? Why or why not?

Has this area always been a desert? What types of forces might have changed the quality of this land over time?

What role, if any, does the border fence play in interrupting habitat?

Political/Legal

Should the United States reexamine its policy on immigration? Do you think the U.S. should build a fence along the border?

How does this book illustrate international relations and illuminate our understanding of other nations?

Should the construction of lifesaving towers and other aids to the illegal immigrants be permitted? Why or why not?

What kinds of American labor laws might prevent or discourage Mexican nationals from attempting this crossing?

Do you think any law or body of law will discourage or prevent situations such as this without economic changes also being made?

We find at the end of the story that Mendez, the head guide for the Wellton 26, received multiple life sentences in prison. In your opinion, will his removal from the smuggling ring truly affect it? What can be done to end the smuggling ring of illegal immigrants to the U.S. and stop these tragedies from happening?

In the recent national election, immigration issues seemed to take a “back seat,” and a large focus of the national debate was on the state of the nation’s economy. In what ways does illegal immigration actually affect the nation’s economy? What were some of the effects of immigration pointed out by Urrea at the end of the book?

Does *The Devil’s Highway* present perspectives on immigration that typically may go unheard in the United States? How has this book made you rethink some of your opinions on the issue? Why?

At the end of the book, Rita Vargas comes to the conclusion that the surviving men’s flight back to Veracruz had cost \$68,000. She then poses the question, “What if somebody had simply invested that amount in their villages to begin with?” (p.199) Using her suggestion, what are some possible programs or ways that money could be used to aid impoverished people in Mexico? What are some pros and cons to these programs? How would this affect American taxpayers and the issue of illegal immigration in the U.S.?

On page 215, Consul Flores Vizcarra says, “What kills people is the politics of stupidity that rules both sides of the border.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Try to give at least one example of shortcomings for both Mexico and the United States on the issue of illegal immigration.

What is wrong with global political, legal, or economic systems that lead people to risk their lives to enter another country illegally?

Has the border between the United States and Mexico always been located where it is now? What influence, if any, might that have on the attitude Mexican citizens have about the border, the legality of crossing it, and the economic disparity between the nations on either side of the border?

What peoples have historically inhabited the border area discussed in the book? What influence, if any, might the ethnic and language history of the area have on potential border crossers?

Societal/Sociological

Introduction to section: Some of these questions may challenge deeply held beliefs, or beliefs you may not even realize you have. They may be hard to talk about, particularly with people you do not yet know well. However, please think about these issues and challenge yourself to see them through the eyes of each of the groups of people discussed in the book.

What are some of the different perspectives we get from this book on the issue of immigration across the U.S. – Mexico border? Through whose eyes do we get to see the different immigration issues? What are the motivations of each group of people? Are their motivations necessarily at odds with each other?

If you were in the same economic, personal, or social conditions as the Yuma 14 originally were, would you risk your life to enter the United States?

Did you find the historical references at the beginning of the book to be interesting? How did they contribute to or detract from the book?

How do you feel about the smugglers who make a profit on smuggling human beings? Do you feel that they are really helping their fellow Mexicans or their search for a more prosperous and better life or do you feel that they are strictly involved in human smuggling for the money? Would the survivors of the Wellton 26 have made it to the United States without the help of the smugglers?

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Does *The Devil's Highway* present perspectives on immigration that typically may go unheard in the United States? How has this book made you rethink some of your opinions on the issue? Why?

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To what extent, if any, do you believe racial bias or prejudice is at work in formulating American laws and American social attitudes toward those who risk their lives to come to America to work here?

On the very last page of the book, the author notes that all of the Yuma 14 victims were listed as white males on their files. Why do you think this is? What is the significance of this identification?

On page 112, Urrea goes through some of the common misconceptions Americans have about Mexicans and vice versa. Were you familiar with these misconceptions? Did you

have or know of any other misconceptions about immigration or the border patrol before reading this book? Does the book provide examples of Mexican citizens other than those who are impoverished and desperate to cross the U.S./Mexico border?

Do you think the steep growth of cellular and wireless communication in recent years has had, or is likely to have, an effect on human smuggling?

Have you ever seen a worker you thought may be illegal working in agriculture, construction, domestic, food service, or other areas? How might the absence of illegal laborers affect your life? If illegal immigrants were not working in the United States, would you be willing to pay more for things such as new buildings, vegetables, or restaurant food?

Do you think it is fair to say that the affluent United States lifestyle is built on the backs of the work of impoverished people? Why or why not?

How long ago did your family immigrate to the United States? Do you know how they entered, and from where? Do you know whether your forebears were legal immigrants at the time they entered the United States?

Writing and Imagery

Who was the most sympathetic character in the book? Who was the least sympathetic? Were any of the people Urrea described purely good or purely evil? Whatever your answer to these questions, think about Urrea's motivations for selecting the characters he did. Why do you think he focused on these people's lives and deaths?

What was Urrea's writing style? Do you see this book as having been written as though it were a novel or for a film? If a film, whom do you think should be cast in various roles? What other films might you compare *The Devil's Highway* with? Describe those comparisons.

What type of imagery did Urrea use? How did this imagery affect your reading of the book?

What, if any, religious imagery do you believe Urrea used? Do you believe this was intentional? If so, what, if any, message do you believe Urrea meant to convey by using this imagery?

What role does the Spanish language have in the book? What do you think Urrea is trying to accomplish by interweaving the translations of Spanish names for North American places into his narrative? (Examples: "Florida" means "flowered"; "Nevada" means snowy.)