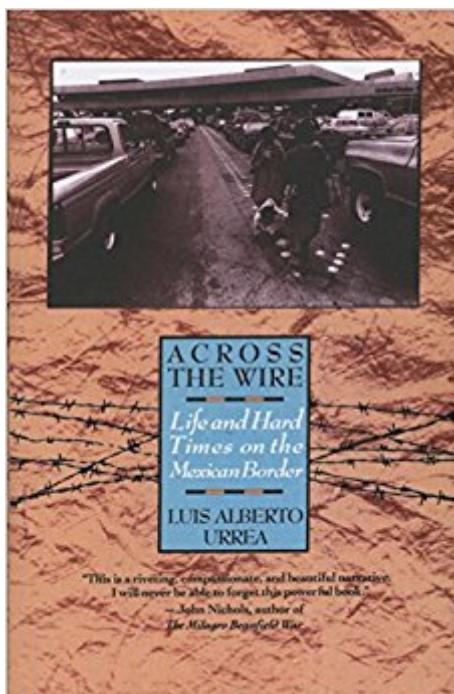


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Across The Wire: Life And Hard Times On The Mexican Border



Synopsis

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 exposé, *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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Urrea, a Mexican-born American, worked from 1978 to 1982 for a Protestant aid group in Tijuana, and he wrote these fragmentary, evocative tales of heartbreak and hope for the *San Diego Reader* after he returned to the region in 1990. "Poverty is personal: it smells and it shocks and it invades your space," Urrea declares, and he admits to being thrilled by both the goodness and the squalor he knew intimately. He visits the dumps where people live, their possessions a bed and a car-battery-powered television. He travels with a Tijuana cop, working "a city of famed vice," and

learns how the cop extracts sexual favors from American women. In one arresting chapter he records his father's death in a car accident, the tragedy compounded by police and funeral costs and a battle with the father's insurance company. Urrea ends with a manic, magic "Christmas story," about a gift giveaway organized by a San Diego rock radio station and attended by a band called the Trash Can Sinatras. There Urrea reunites with Negra--who as a little girl made a shrine out of the doll he gave her, and who says, "I never forgot you, Luis." Photos not seen by PW . Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Urrea, a San Diego native, recounts his experiences in Tijuana and other areas on the U.S.-Mexico border from 1979 to 1991. He meets residents of the Tijuana city dump, visits rural orphanages with American missionaries, and goes on calls with a Tijuana police officer. Urrea's candid style does not sensationalize these situations; each of his Mexican acquaintances is an individual whose story is told with respect and understanding. As a personal and insightful view of Mexican border residents and their lives, *Across the Wire* is a more detailed and cohesive treatment of the topic than Debbie Nathan's *Women and Other Aliens* (LJ 5/1/91). Highly recommended. --Gwen Gregory, U.S. Courts Lib., PhoenixCopyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Every US citizen needs to read this book. Any meaningful discussion of immigration and/or the relationship between the USA and Mexico (and other Central American countries) must be put in the context of the human face it wears. This book does that. I firmly believe in the law, but we must not lose our humanity. Urrea knows how to paint a picture with words. Less is more in his story-telling. I thank him for this book. I've read several books in an effort to better understand our neighbor Mexico and what is happening at our southern border. This book taught me more than several other books combined.

Urrea gives the reader vital, unexpected insight into the lives of poor Mexicans, a poverty the depth of which most readers could not have known. He is an excellent writer who brings to life individuals who somehow find hope in the face of an extraordinary absence of options. It is this look, this introduction to Urrea's individuals that make "Across the Wire" a page-turner.

Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border, by Luis Alberto Urrea, is a compelling "book of fragments" about the author's time spent crossing the border of Mexico bringing help to those in need (Urrea 2). Urrea composed the book in pieces that each tells a specific tale. There are

characters you meet once, and characters that follow you throughout the book, on your journey across the border. From this book I learned to appreciate all that I have. I have a roof, a bed, a closet full of clothes, a kitchen full of food, clean water, and health care. I also have an education and freedom. I live in a safe community where I am surrounded by all of my friends. This book opened my eyes to the way some people are forced to live. I loved the mixture of Mexican slang, or border-speak, and how the author explained the origin of each word. For example, Urrea tells the story of cementeritos, which are glue addicts. He explains that it is derived from the word glue but is the same as the word cemento, which means cement. Urrea explains that these boys are followers of the glue, and use it to get high, and points out that the word cementero is oddly close to the word that means cemetery. That simple explanation gives the reader so much insight into the lives of those characters and how they are viewed by their own societies. There was little that was left to the imagination in this book. Urrea does an amazing job of describing the scene and the smell. Urrea holds nothing back and he details the fear he feels when he enters some towns and deals with la chota, the police. He explains the disgusting things he sees and the sad sights, such as children with diseases. I believe that Urrea did an excellent job in writing this book. It is compelling and compassionate, and I feel like a more rounded person for knowing these stories. I believe Urrea accomplished his task. If you are looking for a captivating story, then Across the Wire is definitely for you. It takes you on a whirlwind of emotions leaving out no detail into the grizzly lives the impoverished lead in the borderlands. This book is inspiring, filled with inspiring people who face so much in their daily lives. As a reader I am inspired to become a missionary and help those who have less than I do. It is amazing to think that when Urrea was helping these people, he didn't have much more than they did, but he was dedicated to the cause, and an unbelievable man.

Urrea follows the families of those that remain on the Mexican side of the border. Urrea is born from an American father and a Mexican mother. He was born in Tijuana but raised in San Diego. Although Urrea spent a significant amount of time during his childhood, he never saw the true hardship of the people living there. From the years 1978-1982, Urrea volunteered under the leadership of missionary Pastor Von, and then truly experienced the poverty and suffering of Tijuana, especially the families that were unable to make it across the border to the coveted San Diego. Urrea's stories follow those looking for opportunity and a chance at wealth. The book covers accounts of corruption and cruelty within the police, gringo tourists, glue-sniffing children, and the Mexicans that live through the poverty. Throughout the book, Urrea's elaborate descriptions are often vivid and vulgar, but the book shines light on the horrific society that the Mexican's had to live

through. While most of the stories are of hardship, there are a few moments in the book where Urrea finds humanity in a chaotic society. Urrea has a unique recognition of kindness that brings a soft element to this sometimes difficult to read book. From the book I learned how difficult life could be when you are born into certain circumstances. The horrible stories of Tijuana are beyond anything I had ever imagined before. Also, I did not realize the extent to which police take advantage of the people of Tijuana. Not only do the police ask for money from the people they pull over, but they also ask women for inappropriate favors to get out of tickets. I didn't like how vulgar some parts of the book were. Sometimes, the book was difficult to read. "He pantomimed laying a penis clearly nineteen inches long across the steering wheel. "I tell them, 'Suck on this and you can go.' And you know what? Gringas are sluts--they always suck my lariat" (121). Overall, I recommend this book to people who have no idea about the processes of illegal immigration, living on the border, or are interested in the hardships of life in Tijuana. The book shows the undercover side of what truly happens when the United States is an untouchable dream. If you cannot handle grotesque descriptions, then this book is not for you, but the descriptive accounts truly put the reader in Tijuana and gives reader an experience of what life is like.

I chose this title for my review because the stories in this book are exactly that. How can we citizens of the world stand by while people are living in garbage dumps? Mr. Heres has again opened my eyes and heart with his truths about strong and full of heart people. I hope that I always remember.

Great book by outstanding author.

I've lived in Mexico and have seen poverty. I am a cynic. Nothing prepared me for what I read. If you can read this and remain unmoved, you are a lot tougher than I am. I had to stop a few times because I felt ill and wasn't certain I could finish. The author is a brilliant narrator.

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