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Book Review

The Devil's Highway (A True Story) by Luis Alberto Urrea. Available from Little, Brown and Company, 2004. 233 pages. ISBN 0-316-74671-1

Nikolai Sokolskykh

Luis Alberto Urrea's novel, *The Devil's Highway*, has as its centerpiece the tragedy that transpired in May, 2001 when a group of 26 Mexican immigrants tried to enter the United States by walking through the desert in the southern part of Arizona aptly named by Mexicans "dead land" or "the devil's highway." Only twelve of them survived the hot, burning sands since they went into the desert without water or food. The rest, or 14 of them, remained forever in the desert, dotting it with their bones which served as warning signs to others not to make the perilous trip. Heat and thirst greeted these unfortunate fortune hunters who were trekking their way along the dangerous "devil's highway." Fathers and sons, brothers and friends--they left their homes with the hope of returning rich and happy, but this dream was as elusive as the shifting sands of the hot desert.

The author analyzed an enormous amount of historical material. In the novel Urrea uses American and Mexican border patrol official's talks, copies of reports, the statements made by politicians, folk legends, historic references of the sixteenth century and so forth. In the Preface to the first edition, Urrea informs us that he spent a year reading and gathering information for his book.

In spite of the abundance of documentary data and the numerous statistics given, the author manages not to lose the central idea he wishes to convey; i.e. to describe a person's tragedy, feel his/her pain, and highlight the problem of illegal immigration. As a writer Urrea underscores the nation's immigration problems by using a literary framework. He creates a gallery of characters, depicts the ambience of small Mexican towns and border settlements, exposes the cruelty and cupidity of the *coyotes* (the word used for the intermediaries who smuggle the undocumented immigrants into the United States) and the work of the Border Patrol. Urrea articulates in various ways his desire for people to love their own country. His narrative highlights the problems existing along the border and tries to understand all points of view: the government, police, *coyotes*, and undocumented immigrants.

Many people are not concerned with the problem which Rudolfo Anaya, a well-known Chicano novelist, characterizes as the greatest tragedy of modern America. Human spirituality seems to be degenerating. People are ready to risk their lives and the lives of others in their quest for a better life. The immigrants' dire straits incite them to commit crimes and many of them are ready to do anything in

order to achieve the so-called "American dream". Americans need manpower and want workers to farm their land, harvest crops, work for low wages in restaurants, and then want the immigrants to go home.

The stories narrated are tragic: José Rodríguez left his home for the first time in his life and went crazy in the desert. Enrique García left his wife and a small child, whom he was going to make happy, and died from thirst. Reymundo Barreda Maruri lost his son in the desert.

Twelve tragic lives, fourteen deaths, the grief of relatives and folks are all well documented in the book. Nevertheless, in spite of the tragedies and grief journeying to the United States without proper documentation entails, America for Mexicans is a magic country where they think they can get rich. The deadly roulette will keep spinning and the spirits of the devil's desert will continue to be pleased.