



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

# Reader Resources

## Into the Beautiful North

by Luis Alberto Urrea



# Table of Contents

# Into the Beautiful North

About the Book.....	3
About the Author .....	4
Historical and Literary Context .....	6
Other Works/Adaptations .....	8
Discussion Questions.....	9
Additional Resources.....	10
Credits.....	11

“...I always hopelessly, passionately, root for the underdog.”

## Preface

The U.S.-Mexico border is not just a line on a map; it is a dream-like destination and departure point, surrounded by desperation and expectations. "No one writes more tragically or intimately about border culture than this son of a Mexican father and Anglo mother," journalist Bill Moyers said of Luis Alberto Urrea, author of numerous works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. In his third novel, *Into the Beautiful North*, Urrea transcends the "us against them" discourse of immigration and writes with compassion, complexity, and humor about the people and places caught up in the border wars. Urrea invites us to think of the border as more than a stark divide between nations: he reminds us that it is a place of convergence where meaningful conversations, and even love, between cultures begins.

## What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



# About the Book

## Introduction to the Book

*Into the Beautiful North* is a quest novel in the grand tradition, though there are no medieval knights, magic rings, or light sabers within its pages. Author Luis Alberto Urrea sets the novel in the present day, in the highly charged world of the U.S.-Mexico border region.

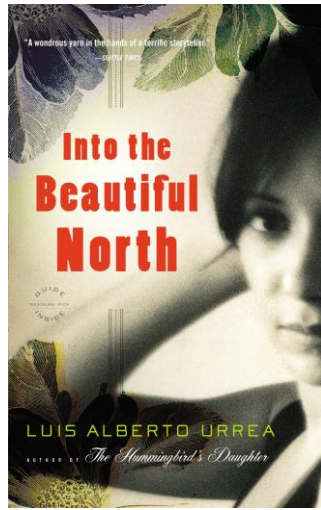
Nayeli, an energetic and idealistic girl of nineteen, is coming of age in a Mexican village, more than 1,000 miles from the border. She and her friends spend their days working at low-wage jobs and surfing the Internet for videos of their favorite bands and movie stars, dreaming of a wider world they have little hope of knowing.

They live in Tres Camarones (Three Shrimps), a village where folks like things to stay the same. But change is coming fast. Nayeli's Aunt Irma has just been elected the first female Municipal President of the village. Nearly all of the men of the village, including Nayeli's father, have gone north to the U.S. to find work, and drug-dealing thugs have recently begun to target the village, anxious to profit from drug-buying American surfers who frequent the nearby beaches.

One night, Nayeli and her friends attend a screening of John Sturges's classic film, *The Magnificent Seven*. In the film, a Mexican farming village is terrorized by a bandit until the village elders decide to fight back, electing three farmers to travel to the U.S. to find seven brave gunfighters to help defend the village. Inspired, Nayeli vows to go on a mission to the U.S. to bring back seven men—including her father—to defend Tres Camarones against the drug-dealing bandidos. She persuades her loyal band of friends to accompany her on the dangerous journey, and the quest begins.

In Urrea's border world, characters come into contact with tensions that arise from many kinds of difference. Urrea explores, with compassion and humor, the microcultures within the border world, from the residents of the Tijuana garbage dump to the upscale neighborhoods of San Diego, and reveals that the distance between them is not as great as one might initially imagine.

Lacking influence, money, or power, Nayeli and her friends employ ingenuity, youthfulness, and hope to overcome



obstacles, suggesting that a new generation can bring new solutions to old problems. Urrea cleverly subverts cultural stereotypes and literary traditions, creating a fresh approach to the classic hero's journey.

## Major Characters in the Novel

### Nayeli

Athletic, bright, strong-willed, and charmingly naïve, Nayeli is admired by loyal friends who, like her, are just out of high school, but share a bleak future in the poor Mexican village of Tres Camarones. She identifies with her Aunt Irma, a charismatic feminist, former bowling champion, and newly-elected Municipal President of Tres Camarones.

### Yolo

Yolo, short for Yoloxochitl, a name bestowed by her liberal Mexican parents to honor her Aztec heritage, was a straight-A student in high school "simmering with revolutionary ideas." Yolo works a dead-end job at the local bowling alley, but reads everything she can.

### Vampi

Veronica, known as Vampi, is the only goth girl in the state of Sinaloa. Her look is distinctive: black hair dyed even blacker, pale makeup, black lips and nails, and a long black skirt. Despite her appearance, Vampi's experience with goth culture is limited, derived from YouTube where she worships bands such as The 69 Eyes and Type O Negative.

### Tacho

Tacho is the gay proprietor and cook of the village restaurant, La Mano Caída (The Fallen Hand), a frequent hangout for Nayeli and her girlfriends. Tacho and Nayeli are kindred spirits, both dreaming of a cosmopolitan life in a big city. They sometimes climb up on the roof of the restaurant to look at the sky, "making believe that clouds were the Manhattan skyline."

### Matt

A young missionary once stationed in Tres Camarones, Matt is the first "real live blond boy" Nayeli and her friends have ever seen. After his return to San Diego, Matt lives aimlessly, until he receives a phone call from Nayeli and the true extent of his generosity is revealed.

### Atómico

Raised in the dumps of Tijuana and armed with a bamboo rod, Atómico brings his unique sense of justice to the journey. His scrappy and maniacal exterior hides a mixture of pride, loyalty, and humble nobility.

# About the Author

## Luis Alberto Urrea (b. 1955)

Growing up in Tijuana and San Diego with an American mother and Mexican father, Luis Alberto Urrea was familiar with the complex realities of the U.S.-Mexico border from an early age.

The dualism in his personal history is reflected in a prolific and celebrated literary career. Urrea writes stories that portray reality on both sides of the border, creating humanizing portraits of

immigrants as well as their adversaries. As the author of many books, including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and memoir, Urrea is a major figure in Latino literature and a member of the Latino Literature Hall of Fame. His work transcends media stereotypes and contemporary immigration disputes, revealing the border as a place of connection as well as divide. "The Mexican border is a metaphor," he noted in a 2011 interview with *Coloradan* magazine. "Borders everywhere are a symbol of what divides us. That's what interests me."

Urrea was born in a poor neighborhood in Tijuana. He inherited a rich legacy of family and cultural lore and a love of storytelling from his extended family, explored extensively in his literary work.

When Urrea was five, his parents moved across the border to San Diego. From an early age, he moved easily between the two cultures. In a 2011 interview with the *San Diego Reader* Urrea said, "To me, Tijuana and San Diego were just inseparable; they were two sides of the same thing."

Urrea attended high school in San Diego, where he and a cohort of artistic friends pursued burgeoning interests in poetry, drama, and rock music.

In the late 1970s, shortly after graduating from the University of California, San Diego, Urrea rediscovered Tijuana. A friend introduced him to "Pastor von" of Clairemont Emmanuel Baptist Church in San Diego, a dynamic individual known for leading relief work projects in Tijuana's massive garbage dump. One of Urrea's first jobs as a relief worker was to wash the feet of the garbage pickers.

Although he grew up a few miles from the site, Urrea was astonished to discover the dump, a literal mountain of garbage, that provides a meager source of income to a large



Luis Alberto Urrea. (Nicole Waite Photography)

community of garbage pickers and orphaned children. The experience was profound for Urrea, who continued to volunteer at the site for years, and has since become a voice for the inhabitants of the dump.

In the early 1980s, Urrea set off in a new direction. With the help of a former professor, he secured a position at Harvard where he taught expository writing from 1982 to 1990. He also held teaching positions at Massachusetts Bay Community College and the University of Colorado.

In 1997, Urrea received an MFA from University of Colorado in Boulder, and today he is a professor of creative writing at the University of Illinois-Chicago. He lives with his family in Naperville, Illinois.

## An Interview with Luis Alberto Urrea

*Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Luis Alberto Urrea on January 11, 2011, and January 12, 2013. Excerpts from those conversations follow.*

**Josephine Reed:** Where did you get the idea for *Into the Beautiful North*?

**Luis Alberto Urrea:** I have family in Sinaloa where my uncle had a tropical movie theater. It had a corrugated tin roof. It had bats. When things would get really loud in the movie, the bats would dive-bomb the watchers. I started imagining what would happen to Sinaloa if there were no men of a certain age left. I realized that probably my aunt, who was Mexico's female bowling champion and a terrifying character, would have taken over the town. Then what would happen if narcos came to this town?

Part of what I was trying to do, believe it or not, was write a love poem about America. This nation is unbelievably blessed and gorgeous and magnificent—and we forget. There's a scene early on [in the book] when, in San Diego, they see giant lawns for the first time. They have never seen green grass as far as you can see, and it's beautiful, lush, watered, and they think, "Wow, this is Valhalla." That happened to me in my fifth-grade transition from the border to a working-class suburb. What a shock. I never forgot it.

**JR:** Can you tell us about some of the characters in the novel and the mission they are on?

**LU:** Atómico is Toshio Mifune in *The Seven Samurai*: this unwanted, uncouth, unwashed warrior who's wandering around looking for a mission. Yet on a deeper level, he's an oddly moral character, and blessedly eccentric. Nayeli was inspired by a young woman at the Tijuana dump whom I've known since [her] birth. She touches me so much because she can't help but smile. People ascribe all kinds of motives to her because of her smile...I wrote the book as a little homage to her.

[I wanted to write a story in which] every person is on a journey, even the settled people, even the people in the U.S. Everybody is in transition, which is how I feel the world is right now. So the border patrol agent is about to retire, and he can't find his place. The young missionary boy has lost his faith, and his mom is gone, and he doesn't know what to do with himself. It's not just immigrants who are moving around. We're moving around, too.

**JR:** The tone and temperament of the book is quite unusual—you take a serious subject and often look at it with humor.

**LU:** At the time that I wrote *Into the Beautiful North*, I had done so much hard work on hard books. Honestly, my writing rule was, "I want to laugh every day." Laughter is a virus that infects everyone with humanity. I thought if I made the story really entertaining, if I made it an adventure, then it would make the general American reader not only want to read it, but make them maybe root for people they either don't think about or actually look at with some disdain.

**JR:** Borders figure prominently in your work. In terms of culture, you realize that borders are more than porous.

**LU:** The border is, in a lot of ways, nonexistent. In these little villages, these girls are on the Internet all day long. They're dancing to goth music from Norway on YouTube. They don't have any way to get hold of the world, but they see it. In the Tijuana garbage dump...there's a little shack with tortillas and tamales and stuff, and he's got one or two laptops, and the kids who pick garbage can go on this guy's Internet. On the other hand, there are borders everywhere. The border is a metaphor for what separates us from each other. Every audience I speak to is torn apart by fences. They just can't see them. My job is to throw love notes over the fence and see who finds them.

# Historical and Literary Context

## The Life and Times of Luis Alberto Urrea

### 1950s

---

- 1951: The Braceros program, a series of U.S. laws and agreements created in the 1940s, prompts the importation of thousands of temporary Mexican laborers.
- 1954: A backlash against illegal immigration prompts "Operation Wetback," a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service initiative to remove immigrants who have entered the country illegally. Tens of thousands are deported.
- 1955: Urrea born in Tijuana, Mexico, to a Mexican father and American mother.
- 1956: Immigration peaks when nearly half a million laborers enter the U.S.

### 1960s

---

- 1960: Latinos are recognized as a significant voting bloc.
- The Chicano movement, an art and social justice movement, gains strength.
- 1960: Urrea's parents move from Tijuana to San Diego.
- 1962: César Chávez organizes the National Farm Workers Association in California.

### 1970s

---

- Throughout the 1970s, *maquiladoras*, assembly plants owned by U.S. companies, proliferate along the border, fueled by the cheap cost of labor.
- 1974: The Mexican American Women's National Association established in Washington, D.C., to advance the status of Mexican-American women.
- 1976: The U.S. Congress imposes a limit of 20,000 visas per country per year in the western hemisphere; the number of Mexican immigrants surpasses the limit by 40,000.
- 1978: Urrea graduates from University of California in San Diego.

### 1980s

---

- 1982: The repeated devaluation of the peso compels more laborers to seek jobs in the United States.
- 1982-85: Urrea teaches expository writing at Harvard.
- 1986: The Immigration Reform and Control Act grants amnesty to people working in the United States illegally. Nearly three million people gain legal status.

### 1990s

---

- 1994: The North American Free Trade Agreement established to increase trade among Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.
- 1997: President Bill Clinton promises Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo that he will discourage mass deportation under the U.S. immigration policy.
- 1999: Urrea awarded the American Book Award for his memoir, *Nobody's Son: Notes from an American Life*.

### 2000s

---

- 2004: The Border Patrol expands dramatically in the wake of 9/11. Ten thousand new agents authorized under the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act.
- 2005: Urrea's book-length investigation of a tragic 2001 border crossing, *The Devil's Highway*, named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.
- 2012: Mexican President Felipe Calderón launches an offensive against the drug cartels.
- *The Devil's Highway* removed from Tucson classrooms after the school district's Mexican-American Studies Program is declared illegal by Arizona in 2010. A federal judge orders a reversal and implementation of culturally relevant courses in 2013.

## The Border

Until late in the twentieth century, much of the 2,000-mile U.S.–Mexico border was a lively, multicultural, even symbiotic region. Though the borderland is best known for the harsh deserts of southern California and Arizona, it also encompasses forests, mountains, and wildlife refuges. Originally, barriers between the two countries were designed merely to separate herds of cattle. The border has been altered several times, either due to the natural movement of the Rio Grande or military conflicts, which resulted in the transfer to the U.S. of five entire states (Arizona, California, Texas, Utah, and Nevada) and parts of others—half the original land of Mexico.

The prevention of immigration grew into a significant political issue around 1990. The U.S. economy had grown dependent on Mexican workers for much of the harvesting of its produce and a substantial portion of its service work in childcare, landscaping, construction, and food service, and many Mexicans relied on financial support from family members working in the U.S. As the U.S. struggled with rising unemployment and threats from external forces such as Al Qaeda after 9/11, concern about border security increased.

Crossing the border has become more difficult in recent years with much-enhanced American enforcement, which now includes more than 21,000 patrol agents who utilize an increasingly sophisticated array of technological equipment to prevent and apprehend immigrants. Those efforts, supported by \$90 billion in U.S. federal funding to bolster fences, personnel, and equipment, have resulted in the apprehension of more than 18 million people since 1990, with a peak number of 1.6 million apprehensions in 2000. Still, many Mexicans (and citizens of other countries in Central and South America) pay "coyotes," people willing to smuggle immigrants into the U.S., a fee that buys three or more attempts at crossing into the U.S. Many of these attempts are successful with more than 11 million Mexicans currently living illegally in the U.S.

The decline of the U.S. wage economy since 2007 and increased border security efforts caused the net migration from Mexico to the U.S. to fall dramatically. But the challenges of economic disparity, tensions over illegal drugs flowing into the U.S., and guns flowing south into the hands of powerful Mexican gangs are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. As Urrea suggests in *Into the Beautiful North*, much remains to be resolved. Until then, the border crossings—successful or not—will continue.

# Other Works/Adaptations

## Urrea and His Other Works

The author of many books, Luis Alberto Urrea is one of the most prolific and important chroniclers of immigration and border culture of our time. "I write the funniest tragedies in town," he observed in a 2012 interview with the San Diego Public Library, describing his accounts of survival on the margins at the border.

A shape-shifter when it comes to literary form, Urrea has said that he allows the story he desires to tell to determine the form and genre of the work. He has authored books of poetry, short stories, novels, and works of nonfiction and memoir.

Although his novels and nonfiction are bestsellers, Urrea often acknowledges that his favorite form is poetry: he enjoys creating hybrid forms that are highly noncommercial.

In 1994 his first published book of poetry, *The Fever of Being*, won the Colorado Book Award in poetry and the Western States Book Award in poetry. He was also included in *The 1996 Best American Poetry* collection.

Urrea has acknowledged many influences and artistic mentors, ranging from novelist-poet Malcolm Lowry to rock-and-roll musicians to haiku masters. His original and arguably most enduring influences are the indigenous storytellers of the border region, including relatives who entranced him with stories when he was a small boy growing up in Mexico.

Urrea's best-selling novel *The Hummingbird's Daughter* (2005) and its sequel *Queen of America* (2011) grew out of his fascination with a family folk tale about his great-aunt Teresita Urrea, a legendary nineteenth-century healer who in the 1930s was widely venerated as the "Saint of Cabora" for her mysterious healing gifts. Urrea spent 20 years researching the book, traveling hundreds of miles to conduct exhaustive research. At one point in the process he studied with Southwestern medicine men and women to better understand the life of this distant, mysterious relative.

In his nonfiction books, particularly in the "border trilogy" published in the 1990s, Urrea employs a highly personal investigative approach. The first in the series, *Across the Wire* (1993), is an arresting account of his experiences as a relief worker among the extremely poor and disenfranchised of Tijuana. It was named a *New York Times* notable book of the year. He continued his investigation of border life in *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* (1996) and in the autobiographical *Nobody's Son: Notes from an American Life*, which won an American Book Award in 1999.

Intending to turn his attention to subjects other than the border, Urrea was unexpectedly drawn back to the subject by a tragic event in 2001, when a group of 26 Mexican men attempting to cross the border into Arizona lost their way. Only 12 survived. Urrea's detailed account of the experience, *The Devil's Highway* (2004), is one of his best-known works. The book was a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize and the Pacific Rim Kiriya Prize.

Urrea creates a portrait of the border rarely seen by most Americans, whose access to the whole is often limited by the shrill polemics of immigration politics and the stripped-down stereotypes of headline news. His ability to inject humanity and complexity into the difficult subjects of immigration, border politics, and economic struggle is one of his greatest achievements.

## Selected Works by Luis Alberto Urrea

### Novels

- *In Search of Snow*, 1999
- *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, 2005
- *Into the Beautiful North*, 2009
- *Queen of America*, 2011

### Nonfiction

- *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*, 1993
- *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, 1996
- *The Devil's Highway*, 2004

### Poetry

- *The Fever of Being*, 1994
- *Ghost Sickness*, 1997
- *Vatos*, 2000
- *The Tijuana Book of the Dead*, 2015

### Short Stories

- *Six Kinds of Sky*, 2002
- *Mr. Mendoza's Paintbrush*, 2010
- *The Water Museum*, 2015

### Memoirs

- *Wandering Time: Western Notebooks*, 1999
- *Nobody's Son: Notes from an American Life*, 2002



# Discussion Questions

1. In the novel, Nayeli and her friends go north—but not to join the ranks of immigrants looking for a better life. What is their mission?
2. Though the border seems far away from Tres Camarones, its influence seems closer than ever before. What forces are driving change in Tres Camarones? What are some examples of traditional aspects of life in Tres Camarones that are affected by border politics?
3. How does the author portray intergenerational relationships among the characters? How do different generations interact in the novel and what do they offer or teach each other?
4. Many people (including Nayeli and her friends) have never seen a place like the Tijuana garbage dump. How does Urrea use descriptive language to help the reader visualize and interpret the significance of this sight?
5. Urrea often takes a comic approach to tragedy. Does this approach enhance or diminish the emotional impact of events in the novel?
6. Urrea's border is a many-layered symbol, holding multiple meanings, cultural subtleties, and contradictions. In addition to the literal U.S.–Mexico border, what other types of borders or boundaries do the characters experience?
7. Urrea underlines the novel's connection to other classic quest narratives by paying homage to the classic film *The Magnificent Seven*. The author creates his own interpretation of the quest narrative, subverting traditional themes and roles. How does he create a fresh approach to the classic hero's tale?
8. How do Nayeli's experiences in Kankakee differ from her expectations? Why do you think she leaves Kankakee without confronting her father? Do you agree with her decision?
9. Did any scene, character, or event in the novel surprise you or change your attitude toward U.S.–Mexico border relations?
10. Urrea has often described the novel as "a love letter to the United States." Do you agree? How is this love conveyed in the novel? Could the novel also be considered a "love letter" to Mexico?

# Additional Resources

## Books Similar to *Into the Beautiful North*

- Malin Alegria's *Sofi Mendoza's Guide to Getting Lost in Mexico*, 2008
- Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, 1991
- Reyna Grande's *Across a Hundred Mountains*, 2006
- Helen Thorpe's *Just Like Us: The True Story of Four Mexican Girls Coming of Age in America*, 2009

## Authors Who Influenced Luis Alberto Urrea

- Mark Twain, American author and humorist (1835-1910)
- Pablo Neruda, Chilean poet (1904-1973)
- Gabriel García Márquez, Colombian author and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1927-2014)
- Alurista, Chicano poet and activist (b. 1947)
- Rudolfo Anaya, Mexican-American author (b. 1937)
- Malcolm Lowry, English poet and novelist (1909-1957)
- Japanese Edo-period haiku masters: Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828), Yosa Buson (1716-1783), Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), and Ueshima Onitsura (1661-1738)

# Credits

## Works Cited

Excerpts from INTO THE BEAUTIFUL NORTH by Luis Alberto Urrea, Copyright © 2009 by Luis Alberto Urrea. Used by permission of Little, Brown & Company, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. All rights reserved.

Grimm, Ernie. "America Broke My Heart, Tijuana Blew My Mind." *San Diego Reader*, 24 June 2004.

Latimer, Clay. "Finding Peace on the Devil's Highway." *Coloradan* magazine, 1 June 2011.

Urrea, Luis Alberto. "Luis Alberto Urrea's Border-Crossing Journeys." Interview by Bill Moyers. *BillMoyers.com*. Public Affairs Television, Inc., 10 August 2012.

---. "Conversation with Luis Urrea." Interview by Lauro Flores. *WaterBridge Review*. Pacific Rim Voices, Sept. 2006.

---. "Into the Beautiful North: Interview with the Author." One Book, One San Diego. San Diego Public Library, 2012.

---. "A Conversation with Luis Urrea." Interview by Josephine Reed. Art Works Podcast. National Endowment for the Arts, 13 Jan. 2011.

## Works Consulted

Archibold, Randal C. "Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration." *The New York Times*, 23 Apr. 2010.

Becker, Andrew and Lowell Bergman. "Mexico: Crimes at the Border." *Frontline*. WGBH Educational Foundation, 27 May 2008.

Clifford, Frank. "Border Fence's Devastating Toll." *Salon.com*, 18 Sept. 2012.

Espinosa, Paul, Exec. Producer. "The Border." Public Broadcasting Service, 1999.

Miroff, Nick. "Lateral Deportation: Migrants Crossing the Mexican Border Fear a Trip Sideways." *The Washington Post*, 12 Feb. 2013.

Molzahn, Cory, Viridiana Rios and David A. Shirk. "Drug Violence in Mexico." The Justice in Mexico Project. The Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego, March 2012.

Nevarez, Griselda. "Victory Over Tucson School District Could Lead to Mexican American Studies Reinstatement." *The Huffington Post*, 8 Feb. 2013.

## Acknowledgments

Writer: Deborah Galyan

Cover image: Derivative of "Greetings from Illinois" postcard. Courtesy of Curt Teich Postcard Archives.



**National  
Endowment  
for the Arts**  
arts.gov

The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



The NEA Big Read Reader Resources are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Arts Midwest