

As good as he can be

UIC English and creative writing professor Luis Alberto Urrea says his two “cataclysmic” books—one non-fiction, one novel—published in the last two years have turned his life upside down.

“The Devil’s Highway: A True Story,” a Pulitzer Prize finalist, lays out illegal Mexican immigration to the United States in human, cultural and economic terms. But as Urrea did his research, a funny thing happened to the Tijuana-born writer. “I went to the border as a bleeding-heart liberal Latino to tell the story of the humanity of the immigrants,” he says. “What I wasn’t prepared for was to like the Border Patrol. I had to acknowledge the humanity of the people policing the Arizona desert.”

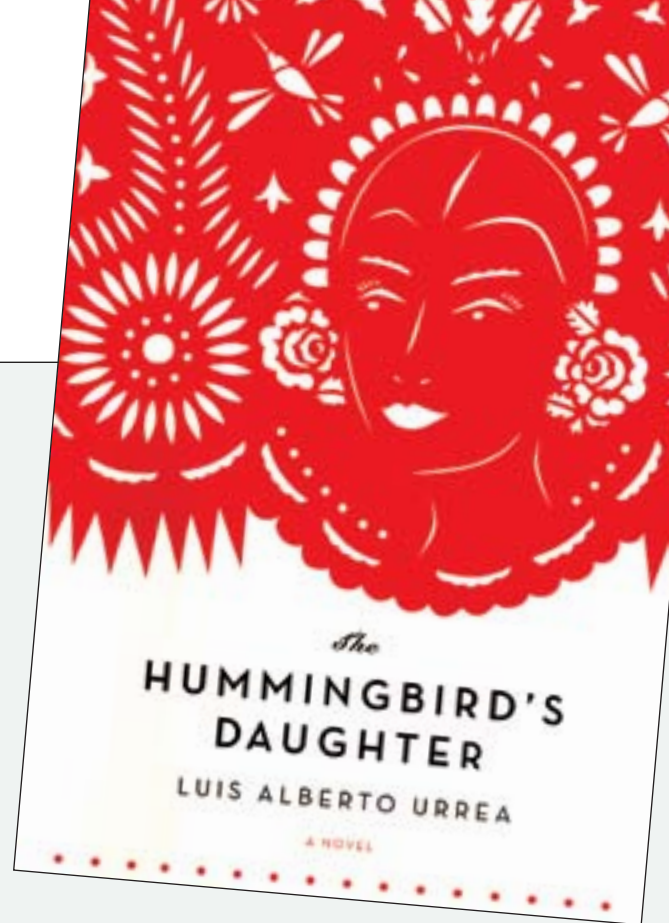
Urrea’s novel, “The Hummingbird’s Daughter,” is based on his great aunt, a Yaqui Indian faith healer. He says it’s the biggest thing he’s written. “‘Hummingbird’ took me 20 years,” Urrea says. “It was like composing a symphony. I not only wanted to tell the story of my Aunt Teresita’s amazing life but also to represent the sound of late 19th-century Mexico and Northern Desert Spanish in English.”

Urrea teaches fiction workshops to UIC grad students and literature to undergrads. “My grad students are smart, dedicated, honest writers and talkers,” he says. “I believe being harsh and critical is a waste of energy, so I buck the writer’s workshop trend with kindness and respect.”

The undergrads are a different story. “They’re energetic, excited, like puppies. Unless I’ve got them arguing or laughing uproariously, I think something’s wrong. They don’t have the developed skills of the grad students, but their hearts and minds are there.”

What does Urrea see in his writerly future? “I want to be as good as I can be,” he says. “I started out as a poet, and I haven’t written any poetry in 10 years, so I want to rev that up. Writing is all of a piece, though. I’d like to write great novels that will stand forever. My next couple of novels could be really good.”

By Mike Lillich



URBANA CHICAGO

World Series special

Two U of I alumni—one from UIC and one of Coach Itch Jones’ Urbana boys—faced off in the 2006 World Series. Former Flame Curtis Granderson, Detroit centerfielder, was the first UIC graduate to play in the Fall Classic. Scott Spiezio, a former Fighting Illini, was a utilityman and pinch hitter extraordinaire for the world champion Cardinals. Spiezio, who stood out with his signature goatee, more precisely an “imperial,” dyed Cardinal red, now has a World Series ring for each hand. He was on the Anaheim Angels team that beat the San Francisco Giants in 2002 in seven games.



URBANA

Art for sale

Pieces of Melmac, a brand of plastic dinnerware marketed in the 1950s, are now collectibles, fetching nice prices on e-Bay. Conrad Bakker, assistant professor of art and design in Urbana, puts a new twist on the plastic pieces: He hand carves replicas from wood, paints them and puts them up for auction. Bakker has carved out something of a niche for himself in the contemporary art world, where he's become increasingly known for his own brand of conceptual art that draws attention to the 21st-century, postmodern consumer culture.



URBANA

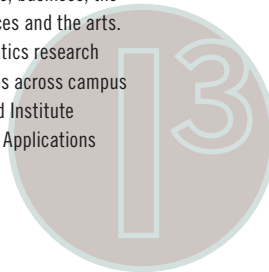
Artistic narrative

Industrial design major Aaron Hughes left Urbana in 2004 for a 15-month tour of Kuwait and Iraq as a member of the Illinois National Guard. Three years later, Hughes has changed his major to painting and is chronicling his war-zone experience. He exhibited "Dust Memories," a collection of his drawings, paintings and collages on campus. In his artist's statement, Hughes said his works convey ambiguous and anxious moments he experienced to "deconstruct the nostalgic war epic—which informs so much of how war is interpreted by mass media—in order to convey the over-complex, monotonous anxieties of a personal war narrative."

URBANA

Interdisciplinary goes to the next level

Question: What do you get when you combine the nation's top graduate library science school, the largest public university library and the computer science department whose graduates founded PayPal and YouTube? Answer: I³—the Illinois Informatics Initiative. Informatics, coined from "information" and "automation," is the science of information. Or, more properly, the metascience of information because it encompasses both human- and machine-based data/knowledge across a range of disciplines—medicine, business, the social and natural sciences and the arts. I³ will coordinate informatics research and educational activities across campus through the newly formed Institute for Advanced Computing Applications and Technologies.



SPRINGFIELD

UIS part of citywide sculpture show

Works by Illinois native, sculptor and Urbana MFA alumnus Preston Jackson were on display at the Visual Arts Gallery on the UIS campus last fall. A collaborative art show of Jackson's cast bronze sculptures were the subject of "Bearing Witness: The Art of Preston Jackson," on display at three other venues in the city, including the Illinois State Museum. In addition to the works showcased at the Visual Arts Gallery, several larger sculptures were displayed outdoors on the UIS quad.



CHICAGO

Class trumps race

Walter Benn Michaels' new book, "The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Equality," was widely reviewed in the popular press last fall. Michaels, a professor of American literature and literary theorist at UIC, goes a huge ox when he announces his theme in the introduction: "The argument in its simplest form will be that we love race—we love identity—because we don't love class." The real inequality in American society is class—the rich have lots more money than the poor. The gap between the haves and have-nots, believes Michaels, has grown into a chasm.



URBANA

Music magic

Four rare instruments by Antonio Stradivari arrived in Urbana last fall in an executive jet. The cello, viola and two violins, on loan from the Smithsonian Institution, were accompanied on the flight by Urbana alumna Sheila Crump Johnson, co-founder of Black Entertainment Television and a former music education major. The decorated and matched Stradivarius stringed instruments, in Urbana for more than a month, were used for two concerts in November and were on display at the Krannert Art Museum. A skilled musician, Johnson has taught violin to students in the Washington, D.C., area where she lives.

