

In Reading Groups

Book Discussion Guide from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

by Jeff Langford



Signs Preceding the End of the World

by Yuri Herrera

(translated from Spanish by Lisa Dillman)

Traversing the lonely territory between the United States and Mexico is Makina, who knows only too well how to survive in a violent, macho world. Leaving behind her life in Mexico to search for her brother, she is smuggled into the USA carrying a pair of secret messages – one from her mother and one from the Mexican underworld.

Chapter 1: Earth

- The novel begins with the words “I’m dead, Makina said to herself...” How might this be literally or figuratively true in the book? How does death reappear throughout the story?
- Is the sinkhole the first “sign” of the end of the world? What other signs does Makina encounter?
- The sinkhole is caused by lust for silver. What role does greed play in the novel?

Chapter 2: Water

- What does Makina’s run-in with the two young men on the bus say about her character?
- Chucho assumes that Makina’s journey is about land, but she insists that her brother, not property, is her motivation. How is the importance of family displayed in the book?
- How does Makina’s river crossing compare to the Biblical crossing to the Promised Land?

Chapter 3: The Place Where the Hills Meet

- Makina and Chucho are confronted by a rancher because of competing business interests. Were you surprised by Chucho’s connections with American police?
- Makina is shot but the wound doesn’t seem to have a lasting effect. Is this a clue about the nature of the story?

Chapter 4: The Obsidian Mound

- When Makina sees snow for the first time, she describes it as a stack of crosses. What other Christian imagery appear in the book?
- “...when it dissolved a few seconds later she wondered how it was that some things in the world — some countries, some people — could seem eternal when everything was actually...fragile.” What places and people in the book are fragile?
- What is the Obsidian Mound?

Chapter 5: The Place Where the Wind Cuts like a Knife

- Makina notices the way her people meld Latin and Anglo language to create something new: “It’s not another way of saying things: these are new things.” How does Makina’s use of language create identity and belonging?
- Makina calls Mexicans who have stayed in America “homegrown Anglos.” Compare do Mexicans who stay home view “homegrown Anglos”?

Chapter 6: The Place Where Flags Wave

- The construction zone is described as “The Abyss,” a theme that appears in the beginning, middle and end of the book. Does The Abyss represent Hell or something else?
- Makina witnesses a gay wedding, but she wonders why the gay couple doesn’t “mind imitating people who’ve always despised them.” How does this thought correspond to her brother’s journey to America?

Chapter 7: The Place Where People’s Hearts are Eaten

- Does the title of the chapter refer to the Army base or to something else?
- Makina discovers that her brother has taken the identity of the Anglo family’s son. Were you surprised by this discovery?

- Makina’s brother says: “I already fought for these people. There must be something they fight so hard for. So I’m staying in the army while I figure out what it is.” What answers do you think he will find?

Chapter 8: The Snake that Lies in Wait

- Is the chapter title an allusion to the Garden of Eden?
- Makina’s long note to the policeman ends with these words: “We, the ones who are waiting for who knows what. We, the dark, the short, the greasy, the shifty, the fat, the anemic. We the barbarians.”

- How does this compare to the phrases on the Statue of Liberty (“Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses...)?
- How do these classifications compare to Jesus’ declaration in Luke 4:18-19?

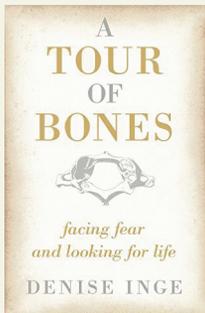
Chapter 9: The Obsidian Place with No Windows or Holes for the Smoke

- Makina runs into Chucho on her journey home and discovers that he has been “looking out for her” all along. Is he literal or figurative guardian angel?

- Makina confesses that she doesn’t understand America. Chucho replies: “Don’t let it get you down. They don’t understand it either, they live in fear of the light going out, as if every day wasn’t already made of lightning and blackouts. They need us. They want to live forever but still can’t see that for that to work they need to change color and number. But it’s already happening.” Do you agree with Chucho’s assessment of Americans?
- The book ends with Makina saying “I’m ready.” Is she ready to return home or to die?

Jeff Langford is coordinator of CBF Heartland and serves as editor of CBF’s missional formation curriculum.

NEXT MONTH



A Tour of Bones

by Denise Inge

Inge discovers that her house is built on a crypt full of human skeletons. Facing her fear takes Inge on a journey into the meaning of bones themselves. This exploration takes on a new significance when mortality abruptly ceases to be hypothetical.