Signs Preceding the End of the World by Yuri Herrera

Herrera explores the crossings and translations people make as they move from one country to another. Traversing this lonely territory is Makina, a young woman 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 US carrying a pair of secret messages—one from her mother and one from the Mexican underworld.


About the Author: Yuri Herrera was born in Actopan, Mexico, in 1970. He earned his PhD for Hispanic Language and Literature from UC Berkeley. He teaches at the University of Tulane, in New Orleans. Signs Preceding the End of the World, is his first novel in English. He and translator Lisa Dillman won the Best Translated Book Award 2016 from the University of Rochester's Three Percent blog and funded by Amazon's literary partnerships program. His latest work includes The Transmigration of Bodies (July 2016). (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the title? Would you have given the book a different title? If yes, what is your title?

2. Do you feel that Makina is a realist character? She goes through a series of dangerous experiences largely unscathed, almost as if she were a hero from a classical myth. Is she perhaps representing the cumulative experiences of many? Why or why not?

3. Do you feel that the depiction of the American characters was stereotypical, with all of them coming across as ill-intentioned, ignorant or simply as sheep-like slaves to capitalism? Is this fair? Does it matter?

4. Were you struck by the references to languages employed by each character, and how language was tied to place and shifted in relation to crossed borders? Did that theme make the read more rich or interesting for you?

5. How does the novel compare – for you – to the works you’ve enjoyed of other authors from Mexico or Central America?

6. Did you find the translation successful?

7. Makina’s brother originally crosses the border because, we are told, there is land available to him in the United States. Then he trades identities and serves in the military. Then he returns...“home”? But he’s not interested in returning to his home country. What motivates him? Why does he make the decision he makes? Does he belong in his chosen world? What do you think about his brief conversations and his relationship with Makina?
8. Cora sent a note with Makina to give to her brother: “Come on back now, it said in Cora’s crooked writing. Come on back now, we don’t expect anything from you.” Cora certainly thought that it was his shame in coming back empty-handed that had prevented his return. It’s interesting that Makina never gave her brother the note, the delivery of which was the entire reason her journey started. Do you think it would have made a difference if she had?

9. What scene resonated most with you personally in either a positive or negative way? Why?

10. How do you feel about the ending? Do you think it was appropriate? How would you have liked to have seen the ending go?

(Questions provided by englishpen.org and goodreads.com)