



## ★ **Alebrijes**

**Donna Barba Higuera**

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In Donna Barba Higuera's distinctive novel *Alebrijes*, an impoverished boy defies a realm of fantastical totalitarianism.

Leandro is a crafty, compassionate thirteen-year-old who lives with his younger sister, Gabi, outside of Pocatel. Leandro and Gabi are orphans of Cascabel heritage. Though the Pocatelans claim superiority, Cascabeles maintain subdued pride. Named after rattlesnakes, Cascabeles are tenacious and protective of each other.

Both Cascabeles and Pocatelans inhabit a postapocalyptic, parched land. Dragon-like "wyrms" emerge from the earth to devour the unfortunate, while the Regime government enforces a climate of fear. Used as laborers, the Cascabeles pick potatoes in the fields. Leandro struggles to help Gabi meet her daily potato quota; failure to do so will sentence her to the dreaded Center of Banishment.

When Gabi steals a strawberry from a market vendor, Leandro insists that he committed the crime. After his arrest, he becomes part of a secret experiment devised by a Regime doctor, Dolores. Leandro's body remains in a laboratory, while his mind and memories are transferred into a small drone. The drone is then given the ability to escape Pocatel. In defiance of the Regime, Dolores is using the drones to find hope beyond Pocatel's dwindling resources. Leandro's drone resembles a hummingbird, while other exiled youth take on varying mechanical animal identities. Collectively, they are the Alebrijes, or magical creatures.

This engrossing, complex world features ravaged subsistence, domination, and the triumph of communities. Pocatel's miseries are contrasted with the verdant landscape of La Cuna, which has trees, vegetation, and a winding river. In both human and drone form, Leandro is an intrepid hero who fulfills the words inscribed upon his metal hummingbird body: "The smallest flap of wings can change the course of history."

The captivating novel *Alebrijes* combines humanity and technology with imaginative splendor.

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