



Six Kinds of Sky: A Collection of Short Fiction

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In this collection of short stories, the author takes the reader on a road trip vaster than Jack Kerouac's and Hunter Thompson's, encompassing not only different physical countries, but also broad internal nations of the psyche. Readers visit lands of language-Spanish and English, and the way these languages are spoken by specific groups, for example, the English of "Indian Country," and the Spanish of the dump-pickers.

The settings range from deep in the "madre tierra"—the motherland, Mexico-through gringolandia, all the way to an Indian reservation near the Canadian border. The wisdom of Mexico, full of chaos and tradition, the land of grandparents, contrasts with the anonymity and reckless responsibility of more recent arrivals in the U.S. In "Taped to the Sky," a man called Don Her Many Horses speculates on the imminent fate of the white guy, Hubbard, passed out in his pick-up truck. He reminisces about the time "he and Brewer duct-taped Ralph Morning Spider to the ceiling when he passed out drunk at a party... Those Oyate boys, a hundred years ago, they might have set Hubbard on fire, maybe staked him out on an anthill. But duct tape! That was funny."

The author compares the garbage dump to an art masterpiece: "From a hillside, it looks like a Pollock canvas in full frenzy. And above, in swirling disks, rise the thousands of gulls. They look as if the white flecks on the ground have become animated and have begun to spiral out of the frame." In this desperate setting, amid tragedies of death and constant strategy to avoid starvation, blooms the very normal and highly personal longing of adolescent love. Young Braulio, recently arrived from the dumps of Mexico City, falls madly in love with pregnant Perla. Happy that she already contains his family, knowing the father will not return from the other side of the border, he waits for the time to tell her of his love.

In the last tale, "Bid Farewell to Her Many Horses," the narrator returns to Pine Ridge to bury his wife, the sister of Don Her Many Horses. He sums up the curious displacement he feels there: "Night on the reservation is like night nowhere else. They say flying saucers visit the Sioux lands. Flying saucers and ghosts? You can hear the grass sometimes like water. Like somebody whispering? It's that this is not your land. This is their land. And you don't belong. A thousand slaughtered warriors ride around your camp, and you think it's the breeze. And they wonder why you're there." Renowned essayist Richard Rodriguez says that we are writing the new stories of America: the new, mixed race, code-switching America. Urrea is writing these stories.

JODEE TAYLOR (January / February 2004)

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