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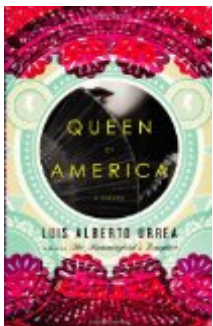
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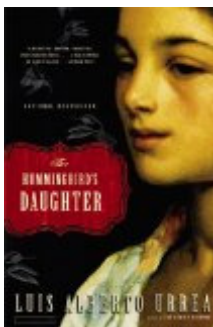
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An Interview with Luis Alberto Urrea



Earlier this year at that sprawling, unnavigable, kvetchfest known as AWP -- the annual conference of the Association of Writers & Writing Programs -- I got to introduce and moderate the very best panel of the long weekend (the title alone was the most memorable: "I Am Not a Terrorist: The Political Writer"), which included Luis Alberto Urrea. Of course, I ended up mispronouncing his first name -- it's Loo-ees, not Loo-iss -- even though I knew so much better as I had just finished his addictive, disturbing three-part memoir known as the Border Trilogy, [Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border](#) (1993), [By the Lake of Sleeping Children: The Secret Life of the Mexican Border](#) (1996), and [Nobody's Son: Notes from an American Life](#) (1998), about being born and raised in Tijuana -- the blonde and blue-eyed son of a Mexican father and an American mother -- and the desperate work he later did as a young missionary amidst the Tijuana garbage dumps. He writes expressively, specifically about his name in *Nobody's Son...* and I had to bungle it. Still, he merely graciously raised an eyebrow. Gawww.



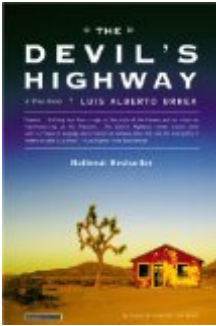
Had I not been asked to participate on that panel, I might never have discovered Urrea, a multi-faceted poet-novelist-investigative journalist with many more books to his name. In the months since my nomenclature debacle, I've gladly done my penance by reading all but two of Urrea's titles (which remain high on the must-read pile). His displays of literary versatility include his Pulitzer Prize finalist nod for his epic work [The Devil's Highway](#) (2004), about a brutal border crossing in 2001 that went wrong, to his lighthearted novel [Into the Beautiful North](#) (2009), to his collaborative forays into the graphic novel with [Mr. Mendoza's Paintbrush](#) (2010) and poetry set



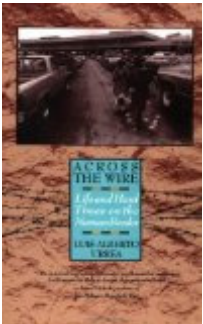


to photographs with [Vatos](#) (2000).

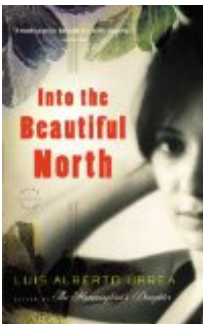
I confess my literary heart beats fastest for [The Hummingbird's Daughter](#) (2005), Urrea's magnificent tome about a distant relative: "TERESA URREA WAS A REAL PERSON," he writes in capitals in his author's note. Although Urrea grew up believing she was his great-aunt, he would eventually learn that Teresa's father was the first cousin of Urrea's great-grandfather. As epic as Teresa's story is, so, too, is Urrea's goliath effort that lasted some twenty years to recreate his legendary ancestor on the printed page.



Born during the last decades of the nineteenth century to a fourteen-year-old servant impregnated by a wealthy philandering rancher, Don Tomás Urrea, Teresa is raised by Huila, a revered midwife and potent healer. As a teenager, Teresa is finally recognized by her father as his daughter, and she is duly trained in the ways of a proper young lady. When violence strikes Teresa's young life, she reawakens with the power to heal. Her reputation grows as the Santa de Cabora, and as the pilgrims multiply seeking her wisdom and miracles, the nervous Mexican military accuses Teresa and Tomás of inciting seditious activities against the government. By novel's end, father and daughter escape to the new world up north to start their lives anew...



Six years later, the Santa de Cabora's story resumes with [Queen of America](#). If glowing starred advance reviews are any indication, copies of the sequel should be flying off the shelves right about now. Father and daughter cross the border into the U.S. fleeing the Mexican officials, but the tenacious assassins and the endless followers prove more difficult to outrun. As Teresa grows exhausted administering to the troubled and diseased, Tomás is merely weary with their peripatetic existence. He finally insists on putting down stakes and establishes his northern homestead far away from the detractors and the damaged. Teresa is not so easily contented even after the family is reunited *el norte*... and a doomed, violent love affair sets in motion her new life as a traveling saint across all of waiting America. Let the mythic journey commence.



How did you "meet" your Great-Aunt Teresa? Did you always know this historical, mystical figure was your relative?

I first heard about her in family stories in Tijuana when I was a little guy. But you have to understand that my family was prone to bullshit. They were fabulous, to put it politely, but they were also given to making up unbelievable whoppers at any second. Within that matrix, I heard this story of an aunt who could fly, talk to spirits, raise the dead -- part of me believed because I was a gullible little kid, but some part of me knew better. But she kept resurfacing. During my boyhood going back and forth over the border, whenever I came back to Tijuana, stories about my great-aunt would come back, but I just blew them off.

Then I began working in the Chicano Studies department at [University of California] San Diego, and found out she was real person! It was 1978, and I found her in a chapter of Carey McWilliams's book, [North from Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States](#). My relatives hadn't realized anything had ever been written about her. That she had historical weight was a total shock. I didn't do anything then, I just knew I had this information. But as soon as I started reading more things about her, really weird things began to happen to me. Suddenly people I didn't know wanted to talk to me about her. These desert types -- the kind I just assumed ate peyote, saw visions -- had stories to share with me.

Then in 1985 when I was living in Boston, I discovered that Teresita's story was actually very well documented. And that's when I began collecting those stories as a hobby.

And now your sequel *Queen of America* is finally here! All together, you've spent twenty-six years of your life bringing Teresa's story to the page: twenty for *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, and another six for *Queen*. How did that quarter-century of writing journey start for you?

I was always a writer. I was always the writer in the family, always the writer in high school. In college, there were lots of writers, but I was always among those writers in college, too. So it stood to reason that I would eventually be the one to make sense of Teresita's life. The more I read about her, the more I learned about how ancient my family history was.

Here I was miraculously teaching at Harvard in 1985. How the hell did this poor kid from Tijuana come to teach these privileged Harvard kids expository writing? That's when I started to accept a world of miracles! I had all of Widener Library to poke around, and I found my own family history all the way back to the Visigoths! I also started to realize how fascinating the tribal history was around Teresita. I had taken enough history and sociology classes so I knew how to research, and the story began to gain traction and become more and more interesting.

At the beginning, I got waylaid because I was trying to get *Across the Wire* published. It took ten years to get that book published, and during all that time, I was amassing Teresa's history. I originally thought I might write a well-footnoted nonfiction history book.

Meanwhile, I'd been doing all this teaching just on a BA -- thinking surely, any year now, I was going to be a famous author so it wouldn't matter that I didn't have a higher degree. But ten years went by, and I decided things didn't look so good for me, so I headed to grad school at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I was supposed to get an MFA, but they somehow lost their program while I was there, so ended up with an MA. That's where I started working with writers who really opened up my eyes, including Linda Hogan [Native American novelist/poet/playwright] and Lorna Dee Cervantes [Chicana Native American poet].

Working with them made me realize that this was a story about a woman and her family that I couldn't really footnote; I had so many inferences at this point, that if really wanted to know these characters in a deep way, I would have to do so through fiction. In my punkier moments, I used to say that you can't footnote a dream... but in reality, you can't footnote a dream. I was in a trance with Teresa's story, so I had to figure out how to put readers, too, in that kind of trance as best as I could.

Was writing *Hummingbird* different from continuing Teresa's story in *Queen*?

Oh, yeah! Writing *Hummingbird* was very difficult; it was terrifying on a lot of levels because of the amount of responsibility attached. I spent twenty years working on that book -- that was my entire adult life! You could say my whole writing career has been a distraction from finishing that book!

Telling that story took me all over the country, through so many deserts. I studied with medicine men and women. I went to strange places that I wasn't quite ready for and wasn't too sure how to process those experiences. Fortunately, I had teachers who could help me analyze some of the craziness. If you try to enter another person's world, you can expect things to happen and they did.

To tell Teresa's story, I had to tell the real story of the Yaqui people. Carlos Castañeda [anthropologist and controversial author of a series of books on shamanism] got it all wrong; the Yaquis were furious with him. I had the responsibility to get their history right, their pre-revolutionary history, as well as family memories. I had to get multiple PhDs' worth of information in many areas to get Teresa's story across, finding obscure information, navigating hidden archives, and piecing together her story year by year. There was virtually no material about her back then. I had to search through basements, back rooms, microfiche, and microfilm. Now there's so much more.

Was your extended family helpful with the research?

Working with family on this project was always interesting because I kept finding relatives I didn't even know I had! I had a family member who had a cousin who was a medicine woman, I found Apache cousins, Yaqui cousins, and what a welcome shock it was to find them!

Then when *Hummingbird* came out and was such a success, the actual direct descendants of Teresita found *me* because of the book! By the time I was writing *Queen of America*, I was working with the great-granddaughters of Tomás and Gaby! So the second book was easier to write because now I had actual family stories, photo albums, letters they had written! It was a communal experience the second time around.

Writing a story about someone else's mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, I wanted to make sure not to offend anybody. It was also really nice to tell family members things they don't know about their own family! Teresa's daughters were so young when she died. So much about their mother they had to learn from others.

I went to Austin where Gaby's children live. To go there and have Gaby's great-grandson appear and put Gaby's picture on stage with me... that was tremendous. On my last book tour -- Cindy [Urrea's wife] and I always do them together -- we went to San Antonio and twenty of Teresa's descendants arrived! I was sweating bullets the whole time; I was so afraid they were going to chew me out about getting things wrong, but they were fantastic. We went out and shared tacos after. It was magical in a wonderful, plain way.

I also found a Chinese branch of the family, the Wong Urreas! Mexico City has so many Chinese Mexican hybrids. I do think I have a whole Asian vibe going on in my books. When *Hummingbird* was picked [in 2006] for San Francisco's One City, One Book, I was doing a reading down there on one of the city piers and a lovely older Chinese woman, who didn't have much English, came up to me after and said, "I know what your book is about... it's about tai chi." She was absolutely right! *Hummingbird* is about tai chi! It was a breakthrough for me to realize that what Teresita was doing with her healing was working with chi, with a body's energy flow. She didn't touch, she channeled energy like a chi master or a reiki healer. Realizing that made me understand that the matrix of holiness and power is universal.

The old lady told me to study tai chi. Isn't that cool? She saw right through everything. I told her, "No one else noticed that other than you!" And she just patted my hand like I was a remedial student.

With that sprawling family which only keeps growing, any other long-buried relatives we might be reading about in future titles?

I'm sure! I just have so much stuff amassed. Right now I'm celebrating from finally getting out from under Teresita. She was like a five-hundred-pound canary I've been carrying on my shoulder forever. I've been putting all the research away and yelling "yahoo!"

But now that I'm done, I often think about writing a nonfiction account of this long journey. Amazing, mysterious connections happened during writing these books. As my kids say, "W-T-F!" I had a lot of WTF moments, more than I could ever imagine! These were definitely non-Western frame-of-mind experiences -- indigenous experiences. That's why people like Linda Hogan and Vine Deloria, Jr. [Native American author, historian, activist] at Boulder were so important to me. They really expanded my concepts of understanding in so many ways. I told Linda [Hogan] Teresa's whole story in hopes she would want to write the book, but Linda just told me, "she's *your* woman."

I still protested: "But Linda, this is a woman's story. And my Western mind can't quite grasp all those spirits, wonders, all that sort of stuff."

"Honey, the Western mind is a fever, it will pass," she told me. And that became my marching call. When I finished talking, she said, "You know this story. You lived this story. You lived this world of miracles, plants, spirits. You have to remember what you forgot!" She was right.

One of the really cool things that happened after *Hummingbird* was at the Tucson Festival of Books. Yaqui tribal people came and they brought me their tribal flags and one of the elders said a blessing on me. I wear one of their tribal pins so people will know that we're affiliated. It was one of those moments that left me thinking, I can just retire now.

You're one of the few writers who actually narrate his works for the audio versions. Because I'm such a major fan after hearing you read *Hummingbird* and *Highway*, I have to tell you how disappointed I was that I was forced to read *Queen* for myself since I read the galley before the publication date. But I'm thrilled to hear that you've recorded an Audible version of *Queen* for those lucky others.

When it came time to do the audio book for *Hummingbird*, I was startled they wanted me to do it. At the same time, I thought I couldn't let anyone else to do it! *Hummingbird* took forty hours in the studio, and I thought it would kill me because of the awful stool I had to sit on the whole time. I said I'd never do it again.

When *Into the Beautiful North* came out, an actress recorded that. And she did a fine job! But many people wrote to say they felt abandoned. So I went back to do *Devil's Highway*, which took less than a week to do the whole book.

I had to be the one to read *Queen*, of course. Just to hear me give birth is worth listening to it! While I was recording, though, I didn't realize how much more adult this book is than *Hummingbird*! *Queen* is so much about relationships, about man-woman stuff, about sex. There were moments in there that I was thinking, I must be seducing the readers! I looked up at one point, and the engineers were just staring at me, and the producer had this big smile on her face! I was so blinded just getting the stories down, I didn't think about all the other stuff, the effect of that romantic stuff! I'm happy. I always wanted to write a grown-up love story about attraction, regret, anger, forgiveness, failure.

I've gotten lots of notes from people who tell me they've been crying over the last third of the book. This is reaching a different goal post for me, writing a weepie! But that's all part of this story; I had to follow the story carefully and honor it.

Ever feel you missed your calling as an actor? Might you actually take to the stage or film someday?

Yeah, well, I was originally a drama major, but I was also always the writer guy. I really discovered theater in high school, went to college as a theater major, partly because I could write my own shows, enlist my girlfriend and all my friends to join in. Everyone was in this group together.

The moment I realized I was pretty good at something, I started asking is there something else I could be great at? It's always been about the story -- reading them, then writing them. I loved that the most. I was a pretty good cartoonist, pretty good actor, but I think I could be really good writer. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I started studying seriously. But if I knew then it was going to be this hard, I would have said, "Screw that; I'll just do hemorrhoid commercials!"

These days, I seem to be on the road non-stop. I'm sort of Luis Urrea doing Luis Urrea; my appearances are more like a theatrical performance. Maybe I'll become the Chicano Spalding Gray someday!

Wait, wait... you said "Chicano"... is that the "right" term?

"Chicano" was a bad word when I was coming up. At least that's what the elders said. The word referred to a Mexican born in the U.S., so by that definition, I'm not Chicano. I was born in Tijuana, but the Mexicans didn't see me as Mexican and the Americans didn't see me as American. I'm a man without a flag. When I started working among Chicanos as an adult, some accepted me, but some didn't. On either side [of the border] I was the "other"; I've always been the other. Later on when I had a bit of success, people on both sides were much more enthusiastic about embracing me.

The word "Latino" seems meaningless to me, and "Hispanic" is just wrong. These days, I just tell people my nationality is "Writer."

Given that you're Señor José-of-All-Genres prolific, how do you actually decide what you'll write next? Or do you just write everything, all genres, multiple manuscripts all at the same time, then make a mad dash to the finish line to meet whatever the next deadline might be?

Poetry is my secret love, and I maintain an almost-invisible, obscure literary journal life to feed that love. My nonfiction writing began as a mission from God; *Devil's Highway* was actually an assignment from Little, Brown! That just happened, and it changed my life forever.

As for genres, to me it's all writing. And the writing tells *me* what it wants to be. I have essays that happen fairly regularly. I'm always kinda looking around, and have my eyes peeled for that story that will make an interesting nonfiction book. That will happen again, no question.

Lately, I've been dabbling again in short stories, which I haven't done much since my kid days. One of them won an Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America for best short story, and another got included in the [Best American Crime Writing 2010](#). Those were great surprises for me. And encouraging.

Now that the *Hummingbird* project is really over, I've been working on researching something in a newer voice... something that has nothing to do with the border! I'm writing some secret stuff that's really horrifying. Right now, I can go wherever I want because I'm totally free. I worry about all that freedom, but my writer pals are all urging me toward the madness!

Given that your writing is so multifaceted, do you have a different writing process for different types of books?

I think so. For example, with nonfiction stuff, especially for *Devil's Highway*, that was such a watershed title for me, I can count my career from that title on! My wife Cindy, who is an investigative journalist, often guided me. We did a lot of the research together, and that teamwork was great.

I would say that both *Highway* and *Hummingbird* were investigative pieces in different ways; both definitely had me poking around in some obscure places. Writing *Hummingbird* was an experience so far beyond anything I ever expected as writer; it was like composing my first symphony in a way.

Writing *Into the Beautiful North* was something else because I wasn't so overwhelmed by horror and heartbreak as I was with *Highway*, and I didn't have the massive pressure I did with *Hummingbird*. After those two books, I decided I was just going to write something that makes me laugh every day. I was so happy with it, I showed it to publishers when it was done; I won't turn in anything that I don't like. Sometimes I just write to lift my own soul, and sometimes that turns into something nice.

One of the interesting processes I've noticed is that when each new book comes out, it initially meets resistance from the fans of the previous book. People go on now about *Hummingbird's Daughter* in a swoony way, but when it was first out, the same people would say things like, "well, it's no *Devil's Highway*!" Then when *Beautiful North* came out, people said it's nothing like *Hummingbird*! I was laughing the other day about what people will be saying about *Queen of America*: "well, it's interesting, but it's no *Beautiful North*!" I do want to tell more Nayeli (*Beautiful North's* peripatetic protagonist) stories because they make me so happy. Maybe that will be my way to blow off steam every couple of years.

I think my writing process is both evolutionary and inter-related in many ways from project to project. Sometimes I'm

working on many things at the same time, but when I'm deep into something, I get in a frenzied, trance state. I'm not on this planet anymore, and I'll look at even Cindy and think, "Who are you?" I'm always stricken to be pulled out of that state.

When you get stuck – do you get stuck? – what do you do for inspiration?

I do get stuck! I think everyone gets stuck! Here's the thing: this is a part of my belief system that continues to grow over the years: I have to thank the ancient Chinese poets and writers, and especially the Japanese haiku poets. Through them, I've come to realize that writing is not a product, but a process. Writing is a life style, a life choice, a path. Writing is part of my process of sacredness and prayer even. What I do is writing; that's how I've chosen to understand and process the world, as a writer.

When I feel stuck, then that season has taken a bit of a pause. The garden has already grown many different blossoms, and my task is to know when not to force something more. It would be a mistake to do battle with the writing spirit. Writer's block is like a stop sign; it's a warning. So sometimes I just think for a while, sometimes I drive cross-country, sometimes I read something. That's the time to do something fascinating that's outside of myself, and there's *always* something fascinating going on. If I get all wrapped up in myself, I'll grind to a halt eventually. If nothing else, I'm just not that interesting.

The world is full of hilarious, upsetting, entertaining, disturbing stuff out there – that well just never runs dry. That's a great gift for all of us. We just have to go out and look.

You've done three memoirs with your Border Trilogy, and it's been thirteen years since number three, *Nobody's Son*, was published. Aren't you due for another installment?

What is there left to say, man?!!

Okay, sometimes I think that a nonfiction version of Teresita would work along those lines, something like an esoteric confession. But I don't know if I'm ready to go on record with true-life ghost stories, although people seem to be really hungry for them. That could be the next Luis-themed nonfiction book. But there's a limit to the marvelous-ness to myself. I get really boring. But the wonder of this whole other world was amazing. And if I can be a lens for that, then I would like to try.

Then there's the experiences of writing *Devil's Highway*; to write that in third person was a definite choice. But I had so much crazy-ass stuff happen to me, like a car crash with Mexican drug smugglers, and their car was -- of course -- stuffed with coke and guns! There must be some place where I can write about all this stuff that just didn't fit the book!

Neil Gaiman gave me some excellent advice: that I should write what I love and the fans will learn to love it, that they will learn to trust you to take them somewhere interesting. I really appreciated that advice, because of course he was correct. I think people want to travel with me on these crazy journeys.

Given the lasting success of the Border Trilogy and the Pulitzer finalist nod for *Devil's Highway*, you've become a de facto expert on border relations, not to mention your own life experiences of being born, living, and later working on the border. How do you process that role as an expert? Is being an expert a burden? Blessing?

What the hell do those people want from me? I still don't know what they want! I just gave a talk at Arizona State University; they have a transborder studies department there! One of the big wigs told me I'm the "voice of the border." What is that?

Here's what I think: I, of course, write about the border because I'm from the border. Others who are *not* from the

border, write these books about the border that are more like "my day at the zoo," books filled with little brown people running amuck. They write without sensitivity; they certainly don't write with any love of the place. That sort of thing bothers me.

I've been accused of being a Polyanna by some of those very writers. Yes, everyone knows it's hell at the border, but it's not hell all the time; that's where my grandmother lives! I write about the border because it became evident early on in my life, that borders are the perfect metaphor for separation between human beings. Not just on the U.S.-Mexico border, but borders anywhere. Everywhere there's a border; you've got people chained in with barbed-wire fences. Those barbed wire fences give me an irrefutable image that people might use to consider their own fences they've built around themselves. Fences haven't meant a lot of joy in my life. When I think borders, I think about building bridges. I try to address those walls of fences with a few bridges of my own.

I'm always surprised that when people talk about the border, everyone knows that the word "illegal" comes attached, but they don't know what that actually means. People have never looked up the laws! Go to Google, put in "Title Eight immigration law" and find out what "illegal" really means. Occupy your own mind! Forget about Wall Street! What's happening at the border is a war of propaganda, rhetoric, and racism.

From various versions of your biography, I feel like your life went from working the border streets as a much-needed missionary to a short stint as a newspaperman to teaching at Harvard – not unlike Athena, fully formed, as a big-name professor type. How did that come about?

You tell me. I don't know! I had been a movie extra. I was a cartoonist for a nudie mag, the first androgynous nudie magazine with both male and female fold-outs -- there was nothing sexy about that -- but it went under really fast. I needed the money. I worked the graveyard shift of the local 7-Eleven. I was a TA in the Chicano Studies department at UDSD. I had to really scramble to keep my head above water.

One of my old professors [at San Diego] was a writing teacher and he had gone off to Harvard to teach. Turned out he was a Harvard man and going home to be the second-in-command in expository writing. I was desperate, and I wrote to him for a job as a janitor. I was literally up to my ankles in blood and guts working in the Tijuana garbage dumps, I was overwhelmed and didn't know how to process what I was seeing. I was still just a kid.

I always tell my students this, that you'll discover in life that sometimes you forget who you are, and you might have to compromise who you are because you have to pay your bills and stay alive. So there I was, never making a buck, and I needed to get out. So I wrote my old professor telling him I'd clean classrooms, I'd be a janitor. Instead, he ended up orchestrating an expository writing job for me!

There was no other way I could have gotten into that world; he made a case for me and changed my life forever. I was literally working at an orphanage in the middle of the Baja hills on a Friday, and on Monday I was flying to Boston for the first time in my life. I got on the plane and Bo Diddley came and sat across the aisle from me. I knew it was a sign from above! He borrowed my pen to sign autographs. Me and Bo, we were going to Boston! I still have that red pen.

It was at Harvard that I realized that I wasn't just a border rat, but that I was an American. I didn't think I would be welcome. I thought I was this underclass guy, nobody wuvs me! But the world turned out to be bigger, better, more welcoming than I could ever have imagined. Here I was, shaking hands with Eudora Welty, chatting with John Irving, and no one came to arrest me! Plus, Harvard gave me Teresita!

You obviously proved to yourself (and many others) that you're a damn good professor. And now you're professor-ing at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a serious, long-term gig, right? What are the best parts of teaching? Any worst?

His gig has been longer than I thought it would be. Hands down, the best part of teaching is my students. So many times in the classroom, something transcendent happens to take me by surprise. We share so many laughs all the time. If we're not laughing, then I know something is wrong. The classroom is my refuge. It's my home base.

The bad part is that it's very difficult to juggle being a professor with other things that keep happening. That causes me a lot of distress. I don't know how to keep both careers at once. The school has been very forgiving of my many distractions; they've been very cool.

The part of teaching I like least is all the rigmarole involved -- the meetings, the rules, the constant forms to fill out -- all that drives me crazy. I want to make sure that I can do this and that, and neither suffers. But that's really tough, maybe impossible. It's turning my chin hair gray, but I figured that would happen eventually.

So from reading some of your blog posts, I get the impression you're on the road *a lot*. How do you balance the whole family and work thing?

Things can get really difficult. When the blitzes come on, sometimes the pace is so blinding that I don't know where I am or what I'm doing. And I start to despair. But then I remember how I used to scrub public toilets and make donuts all night, and I remember to count myself lucky in those moments for what I get to do now.

Writing is my job, but meeting thousands of people all the time is part of that. It's wonderful, but weird at the same time. It's a good thing I'm such a hambone and like chatting with folks.

On the home front, no one even bats an eyelash anymore even though I'm gone so much. My eleven-year-old doesn't even miss me anymore. But I try not to miss any of the important things, sixth grade band concert, that sort of thing. Being at those things is my *main* job -- being a husband and dad are my most important jobs. When this next book tour happens, Cindy will go with me. Our twenty-two-year-old has graduated college and is back. Our nineteen-year-old will be home for Thanksgiving. They'll be around to take care of our eleven-year-old together.

One of the many great things about the Midwest is the involvement of neighbors. Ours include FBI agents, so we have tight security around our house: lots of aunties and uncles with guns strapped to ankles! They've all been supportive so far. Just like it's better to have the border patrol like me than not like me. Same with the FBI. So far, it's been pretty good.

And the inevitable: what are you working on now?

A bunch of stuff. I've just started a new audio column for *Orion* magazine, which is this beautiful, sort of natural world-themed reportage and fine arts magazine. That's been really fun.

I'm putting together a volume of poetry. I'm writing two novels at once, trading on and off to keep myself entertained. One is about the Red Cross and World War II -- *nothing* to do with Tijuana or the border! The other is a scary book. It's a secret project that I'm not quite sure what to do with. I might have to publish it under a pseudonym because it's just so radical. If some random, scary, narco-filled book shows up, it will probably be mine.

I really love the idea of writing under a pseudonym. A lot of my writer friends write under pseudonyms. I could do that, too, and free myself from the tyranny of me! Who knows what sort of expressions might come of that? I might even already have a name, but I'll have to keep that secret. The book is far from being completed; I'm still just messing around with it. Although if I end up exposing a lot of the narco world, I really will need to keep things secret! Those issues have come up in the past, that danger. At least our FBI neighbors will be ready for the bad guys!

Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program.