FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 13, 2016

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First time ever: Five public libraries and Dominican University join forces to explore immigration themes this fall through NEA Big Read

Community reading program centers on Luis Alberto Urrea’s novel Into the Beautiful North

Oak Park, IL – As recipients of a $9,000 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Big Read grant, the Oak Park Public Library is joining with River Forest Public Library, Forest Park Public Library, Berwyn Public Library, Maywood Public Library, and Dominican University to explore issues of immigration through the NEA’s Big Read novel Into the Beautiful North by Luis Alberto Urrea.

The Oak Park Public Library is one of 77 nonprofit organizations nationwide to receive a grant to host an NEA Big Read program between September 2016 and June 2017. Designed to unite communities through literature, this Big Read collaboration is the first between these five neighboring public libraries and Dominican University, including the university’s Rebecca Crown Library, on a national grant-funded program across village and city borders.

Between mid-September, the start of National Hispanic Heritage Month, and Nov. 2, the Day of the Dead, the five public libraries and Dominican University will host a series of events delving into Urrea’s novel and immigration themes, including book discussions, film screenings, art exhibits, and discussions with Chicago-area immigrants, immigration attorneys, and more local experts. Events at all six organizations will be available at oppl.org/calendar closer to their dates. The Oak Park Public Library is now seeking artists to submit immigration-themed artwork for its Main Library Art Gallery exhibit Crossing Borders, for display in September and October. The deadline to apply is June 30; for more information contact Margita Lidaka, Arts and Culture Librarian at the Oak Park Public Library (mlidaka@oppl.org, 708.452.3475).

“Our hope is that neighbors in this group of racially and economically diverse communities will read Into the Beautiful North and take new opportunities to learn and connect through informative conversations with each other and local experts,” said David J. Seleb, Executive Director of the Oak Park Public Library.

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As the author of 14 books, including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and memoir, Urrea is a major figure in Latino literature and a member of the Latino Literary Hall of Fame. Urrea wrote the best-selling novel *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*, and his nonfiction book, *The Devil’s Highway*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction. Urrea teaches creative writing at the University of Illinois–Chicago. *Into the Beautiful North* is his third novel.

With *Into the Beautiful North*, which is set in the highly charged world of the U.S.–Mexico border region, Urrea transcends the “us against them” discourse of immigration and writes with compassion, complexity, and humor about the people and places caught up in the border wars.

“Dominican University is pleased to participate in this Big Read program featuring *Into the Beautiful North*, particularly given our growing Latino student demographics,” said Jessica Mackinnon, Director of Public Information at Dominican University. “Many of our students are acutely aware of the issues that Luis Alberto Urrea illuminates in his powerful novel, and we look forward to involving them in this community-wide initiative.”

“*Into the Beautiful North* is the perfect book for a community book discussion,” said Sue Quinn, Director of the River Forest Public Library. “This novel presents the hardships faced by illegal immigrants through a strong narrative, colorful and well-developed characters, and well-timed humor. It will be enjoyed by many readers, and the resulting discussion will enrich our understanding of the immigrant plight.”

“Maywood’s participation in the NEA Big Read will increase awareness of some of the lesser known struggles that people who are immigrating into the United States of America must face,” said Victor Dixon, Head of Information Services at the Maywood Public Library District. “In our area, there are local organizations that help people to triumph over these difficulties, such as the Quinn Community Center, with Gabriel Lara as its director, and P.A.S.O. (West Suburban Action Project), whose executive director is Mony Ruiz-Velasco.”

“Berwyn’s participation in the NEA Big Read allows us the opportunity to expand our Community Read Program to all generations of Berwyn residents, while crossing borders and opening our library to neighboring communities,” said Crystal Vela, Circulation Department Head, Berwyn Public Library. “This endeavor solidifies our partnership with Morton West High School through the addition of the book *Into the Beautiful North* to their curriculum, an author visit by Luis Urrea, and an art exhibit of students’ work. The Berwyn Public Library is honored to host this broad selection of programming that will highlight our ever-growing Latino population.”

“Our Forest Park staff is excited to work with other area libraries to create a program that crosses village lines and brings our communities together,” said Magan Szwarek, Adult Services Manager at the Forest Park Public Library. “Luis Alberto Urrea has created a beautiful story that I believe will resonate with Forest Parkers and beyond.”

Managed by Arts Midwest, the NEA Big Read offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book. The program supports organizations across the county in developing community-wide reading programs that encourage reading and participation by diverse audiences. Organizations selected to participate in the NEA Big Read receive a grant, access to online training resources and opportunities, and educational and promotional materials designed to support widespread community involvement. Learn more at [neabigread.org](http://neabigread.org).
About Into the Beautiful North (2009)
Nineteen-year-old Nayeli works at a taco shop in her Mexican village and dreams about her father, who journeyed to the U.S. to find work. Recently, it has dawned on her that he isn't the only man who has left town. In fact, there are almost no men in the village—they've all gone north. While watching The Magnificent Seven, Nayeli decides to go north herself and recruit seven men—her own Siete Magníficos—to repopulate her hometown and protect it from the bandidos who plan on taking it over.

“No one writes more tragically or intimately about the border culture than this son of a Mexican father and Anglo mother,” journalist Bill Moyers said, introducing author Luis Alberto Urrea on his show Moyers & Company in 2012. “Born in Tijuana and raised in San Diego, he grew up in both worlds, and they appear and reappear in his acclaimed novels, essays, and poems.”

In Into the Beautiful North, Urrea transcends the “us against them” discourse of immigration and writes with compassion, complexity, and humor about the people and places caught up in the border wars. Urrea invites us to think of the border as more than a stark divide between nations: he reminds us that it is a place of convergence where meaningful conversations, and even love, between cultures begins.

About the National Endowment for the Arts
Established by Congress in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts is the independent federal agency whose funding and support gives Americans the opportunity to participate in the arts, exercise their imaginations, and develop their creative capacities. Through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector, the NEA supports arts learning, affirms and celebrates America’s rich and diverse cultural heritage, and extends its work to promote equal access to the arts in every community across America. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the National Endowment for the Arts, and the agency is celebrating this milestone with events and activities through September 2016. Visit arts.gov/50th to enjoy art stories from around the nation, peruse facts and figures, and check out the anniversary timeline.

About Arts Midwest
Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people’s lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six nonprofit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest’s history spans more than 25 years. Learn more at artsmidwest.org.