

'Sky' covers a lot of ground in a slim volume

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By TONY BECKWITH / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

A slim volume of short stories can be a wonderful companion. Easy to carry around and dip into at will. A portable escape hatch you might say – an exit to another reality when the need arises.

Six Kinds of Sky offers a glimpse into far more than half a dozen realities. On the back cover the stories are described as "sad, funny, tragic, Mexican, Indian, gringo, passionate and fun." I would add "moving." Each story moved me in its own particular way.

The first is hilarious and moved me to laughter. It is the story of Mr. Mendoza, the Graffiti King of All Mexico, who has taken it upon himself to be the conscience of the small village of Rosario. The narrator is a young boy whose observations and amusing repartee with his cousin provide a down-to-earth commentary on life in the village and the transcendental nature of Mr. Mendoza's eventual departure.

Having shown that he can write humor (no easy task), Luis Alberto Urrea then takes us on a tour of more somber emotions. In the second story we accompany a man as he drives blindly across the country, reviewing (and reviling) the sudden collapse of his marriage. His wife, we learn, has 12-stepped out the door with her therapist, who "had stepped right into Mrs. Hubbard's pants and taken a very personal inventory, indeed."

Six Kinds of Sky
Luis Alberto Urrea (Cinco Puntos Press, \$12.95 paperback)

Later in the book we are treated to a wistful backward glance at youth and love – the aching, impossible kind of puppy love that never seems to work. And when the fragile bubble inevitably bursts, a broken-hearted young man has no alternative but to steal the family car and roar out of town at dawn. Mr. Urrea generously seasons his stories with many interesting cultural references, writing about Cajuns and Indians and Americans as well as Mexicans. In this story, for example, he confirms that the Beatles' *White Album* was just as popular south of the Rio Grande as it ever was in the United States.

Then there is a bittersweet account of life among the scavengers who live in and off the Tijuana trash dumps. Closely observing a world that is as bleak as one could imagine, the author records the sometimes raw, sometimes poignant humanity of these people clinging to the final link of our society's food chain. In an exquisitely ironic scene, missionaries from San Diego distribute food to the

scavengers. Juanita looks at a can of escargots with a picture of snails on the label. "My God," she says, "gringos eat bugs," and throws the can away.

These well-crafted stories take us on a ramble under six different kinds of sky, from the endless starry night of Mazatlán to the wide-open spaces of the Sioux Nation in South Dakota. Taken together they seem to trace an arc that, from a distance, looks like the path taken by a boy on his way to becoming a man. And getting to know himself and his world along the way.

Writer and translator Tony Beckwith lives in Austin.
