Reading Guide: *Signs Preceding the End of the World* by Yuri Herrera

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**Part 1: The Earth**

**Characters:**

Makina----

Cora----

Makina’s brother--

Mr. Double-U----

Mr. Aitch----

Mr. Q----

1. Consider the tone set by the first words: “I’m dead, Makina said to herself when everything lurched.” What is the other trying to convey about Makina’s uneasiness? Her position relative to the soil?

2. What is Makina’s relationship to violence? To loss? How is it established very early? (1-2)

3. Why had Makina gone to Little Town? What is her ultimate destination? (2) What do we know about her family so far?

4. Who has Makina come to see? Why?
5. Why is Mr. Double-U indebted to Cora?

6. What is Cora’s relationship to Mr. Aitch? What does Mr. Aitch want from Makina?

7. What is “hubris”?

8. What does Mr. Aitch want Makina to do?

9. How does Makina begin to assert herself? Begin to define what she wants on her terms?

10. What does it mean that Makina thinks this: “You are the door, not the one who walks through it.”
11. What is Makina’s job? What is the significance of that role? What languages does she speak?

12. Why does Makina need Mr. Q?

13. Why is Makina afraid of staying too long? What does it mean that her friend stayed too long and “warmed his chest in a different way.”

**VOCAB:** *Big Chilango—Mexico City*

14. What is Mr. Q’s prediction? What do his words mean?

**VOCAB:** *Cacique—*a leader (Taino language)*
Part 2: The Water Crossing

Characters:

Makina’s boyfriend---

The boys on the bus

Chucho

1. How does Makina behave in the Big Chilango?

2. How does Makina think of her younger sister?

3. What is the significance of Makina’s role as interpreter/translator/phone operator?

4. How does Makina treat her boyfriend? What does that say about her? About how she feels about men?

5. Why does Makina’s brother make the initial crossing?

6. Describe the encounter on the bus from the Big Chilango.

7. How does Makina assert herself?
8. What does Makina contemplate on the bus journey? What does she think about the world? Is she an optimist? A pessimist?

9. Where does the bus drop off Makina?

10. Describe the housing situation at the border; what’s it like? Who is there? What’s the mood? General atmosphere?

11. Who is Chucho? How does he know who Makina is? What is his job?

12. How does Makina cross the river? Where is she when she gets across?
**Chapter 3---The Place Where the Hills Meet**

**Characters:**

Anglo rancher

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1. What is the landscape like when Makina crosses the river? What does she find there?

2. Explain the significance of Makina’s flashback with the man who has returned from the Norte. What has he brought? What is being said about technology? About modernity? About progress? How does Makina outwit her brother?

3. Who finds them on the road? Does it matter that he is an Anglo? Why does Chucho call him a “patriot”?

4. Describe the firefight that occurs. How does Makina escape?

5. Why do you think Makina recounts her possession so carefully? Why does she consider the possessions of others on the border?
Chapter 4: The Obsidian Mound

Characters:

Driver

The old man (Mr. Aitch’s colleague)

Mr. P

1. How is the climate changing on her journey? Any significance?

2. Why do you think Makina keeps thinking about the importance of getting back to her home?

3. Describe the city she finds; what are the signs saying? Consider the signs she reads and the title of the book itself.

4. What are Makina’s observations of American life? Is it what she expected? Is it what you expected? “She noticed how miserable they looked in front of those little digital screens, and the way they nearly-nearly jumped every time the machine went bleep! at each item.”

5. Who are the people she observes? What is she remarking about them? “These were her compatriots, her homegrown, armed with work.”
6. Explain the remark: “All cooking is Mexican cooking.” What is the layered meaning of that?

7. What do you make of the fact that Makina has been struck by a bullet through the ribs and is still walking? That she doesn’t require medical attention?

8. Who is Mr. P? Why is Makina so suspicious of him? What is his relationship to Mr. Aitch?

9. What’s the significance of the baseball stadium as a location? About Anglo/Mexican relationships?

10. What does Mr. P offer Makina? Why do you think she is so determined to see her brother? What is she trying to tell him?
Chapter 5: The Place Where the Wind Cuts Like a Knife

Characters:

1. Who are the people described in the opening scene of chapter 5? What does it mean to be homegrown and anglo? What does it mean that “their tongue is a nebulous territory between what is dying out and what is not yet born.”

2. What is Makina’s reaction to this new development in language? How does she relate to this new hybrid language?

3. Why do you think the author is using confusing and ambiguous names in the work? Why have all the cities been veiled?

4. What are the messages that Makina’s brother has sent? What kind of mixed signals are they sending? Why do you think she is so dedicated to her brother?

5. Where does Makina land at the end of the chapter? What is the environment like? What is the “tundra”? 
Chapter 6: The Place Where Flags Wave

Characters:

Boy from the bus

Dona

Home owner

1. How do you think Dona knows who Makina is?

2. Where has her brother gone? Where does Makina go to look for him?

3. Who answers the door? What awkward encounter does Makina have at the threshold?

4. Where has the family gone? Where is the family’s son?

5. What does Makina recount about family? About family habits? About family makeup?

6. What does Makina see on the way to the Army Base? What are her reflections?

7. What commentary on assimilation and difference is she making relatively to same-sex marriage? How does it relate to immigration? Consider the term “papers.”
Chapter 7: The Place Where People’s Hearts Are Eaten

1. Consider this line: “And what was the point of calling the cops when your measure of good fortune consisted of having them not know you exist.

2. Why does Makina’s brother have a different name? Why does he answer to this new name?

3. What’s the truth about “the land” that was believed to belong to Makina’s brother?

4. How did Makina’s brother join the Army? Explain the story.

5. What commentary on class might Herrera be making here based on Makina’s brother’s entry into the Army?

6. Where did her brother go during his time at war? What happened when he returned?
7. What do you make of all the cases of mistaken identity? Of loose identities? Of variable notions of self?

8. What do you make of this line: “I guess that’s what happens to everybody who comes, he continued. We forget what we came for, but there’s this reflex to act like we still have some secret plan.”

9. What does it mean for Makina’s brother to be a part of the American army? An army in a country he’s not even legally a part of?

10. What was Cora’s message to Makina’s brother? What does it mean? Does Makina share it with him?
Chapter 8: The Snake That Lies in Wait

Characters: Police officer

1. What disruption occurs after Makina leaves the barracks?

2. How is Makina treated by the officer? How is the officer treating everyone else? Why?

3. What does Makina write? Why? What is the tone of this letter?

4. What is the effect of Makina’s letter? Why did it work? What does this show?

5. Consider written language thus far in the text—where has it been successful? Where has it failed? Why? What kind of language seems effective at particular times?
Chapter 9---The Obsidian Place with No Windows or Holes for the Smoke

1. Who greets Makina on a bench downtown? Why is this a surprise?

2. Why is she surprised that he would help her given his affiliation is with Mr. Aitch?

3. Explain what Chucho means about people on the other side: “They need us. They want to live forever but still can’t see that or that to work they need to change color and number. But it’s already happening.”

4. What does Makina receive? What do you think she will do with it? What does she mean that she is “ready.”