

The Barbarian Nurseries

by Héctor Tobar



About the Book

Just as Tom Wolfe captured the excesses of a generation in **The Bonfire of the Vanities**, Pulitzer Prize winner Héctor Tobar has crafted a novel that defines America at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Beginning in a tony Orange County suburb, this is a portrait of the peculiar intersection between newly rich progressives, now suffering from 401(k) jitters, and the undocumented immigrant servants who keep them from having to face reality.

In the Torres-Thompson household, only the maid, Araceli, has survived the recent downsizing. The gardener and nanny have been let go, leaving Araceli to maintain order in an increasingly unruly family. Limited by the language barrier, she silently marvels at the abundance of clothes and toys and other luxuries crammed into her employers' home, though she sees no beauty in their gated community, especially when compared to the historical riches of Mexico City.

Fed up with economizing, Maureen Thompson hires a high-end landscaping firm to renovate the poolside garden. She doesn't tell her husband, Scott, and the ensuing credit-card revelation pushes them to the brink. One morning, after Scott and Maureen have had an especially volatile fight, Araceli wakes to find them gone. As the hours tick by, fading into night, she tries to maintain a routine for their two boys, who have been left behind. She is anxious for the boys' parents to return, but they don't. When the list of emergency contacts proves useless, Araceli embarks on an odyssey to find Scott's Mexican father, taking the boys with her by bus and train as they travel through the poorest neighborhoods of Los Angeles in search of Señor Torres. When the media find out what she's done, her actions spark a firestorm; instead of being seen as a hero, she is labeled a kidnapper, while Children's Services takes aim at Scott and Maureen.

Captivating and provocative, **The Barbarian Nurseries** holds a mirror up to the many faces of contemporary California. We hope this guide will enrich your experience of Héctor Tobar's uproarious examination of the new American Dream.

Discussion Guide

1. What were your initial impressions of the Torres-Thompson family and Araceli? How did your understanding of them change throughout the novel?
2. Maureen and Scott, along with their friends, consider themselves to be progressive. How would they need to change if they were to bring about true progress in their community? Are the newly rich of this century very different from wealthy entrepreneurs from other generations?
3. Do Araceli and the other servants in the neighborhood have any leverage, or are they entirely powerless with their employers?
4. Discuss Los Angeles as if it were a character in the novel. What personalities and history are captured in the neighborhoods Araceli travels to, with and without Brandon and Keenan? How do the extremes of rich and poor affect the city as a whole? Do Brandon and Keenan see the world the same way as other characters in the novel, even though neither one of them has traveled far before (except through fiction)?
5. In Maureen's and Scott's minds, what does good parenting look like? How is this different from Araceli's parenting standards? How does Brandon and Keenan's childhood compare to their parents' childhood?
6. Does Maureen treat her baby daughter, Samantha, differently from her sons? What does it mean for her to have a little girl in a household of males? When Maureen and Scott have power struggles, does gender come into play?
7. In the scenes depicting Araceli's time off, what is most striking to you about her true self and her lost dreams of being an artist with a college education?
8. What would America look like --- economically, socially, and otherwise --- if Janet Bryson had her way? Were you surprised when the author revealed how much Araceli earns per week (\$250 cash, on top of room and board), as well as Pepe's annual salary range (in the four figures)?
9. At every turn, Tobar finds a place for humor while keeping the story line tremendously realistic. What makes satire the best way to understand the issues of class and immigration raised in the novel? How did it affect your reading to know that the author is a Los Angeles native whose parents emigrated from Guatemala?
10. Discuss the translation and language issues that arise in **The Barbarian Nurseries**, including the moments when non-native speakers try to use Spanish. Is Araceli in some ways protected by the fact that her English is limited?
11. Ultimately, whose fault is it that the Torres-Thompson children were briefly without parents? Could something similar have happened in your household? If so, would you have been grateful to Araceli or suspicious of her?
12. Why is Scott so different from his father? How has Grandfather Torres evolved since the time the photograph was taken?
13. The title is referenced in chapter eight, when Maureen looks at the landscapers and thinks to herself, *What am I doing, allowing these sweaty barbarians into my home??* In chapter ten, Araceli uses the expression *qué barbaridad* when she thinks about Maureen's not telling her where she's gone. Who are the barbarians in this novel? What is being

nurtured in the ?nurseries??

14. In the closing scenes, many of the characters experience newfound freedom. What did they have to sacrifice in order to gain that freedom? How did their definition of freedom change?

15. How would you have answered Felipe's question in the novel's final lines?

Author Bio

Héctor Tobar is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and novelist. He is the author of the critically acclaimed *New York Times* bestseller DEEP DOWN DARK, as well as THE BARBARIAN NURSERIES, TRANSLATION NATION and THE TATTOOED SOLDIER. Héctor is also a contributing writer for the *New York Times* opinion pages and an associate professor at the University of California, Irvine. He's written for *The New Yorker*, *The Los Angeles Times* and other publications. His short fiction has appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, *L.A. Noir*, *Zyzyva* and *Slate*. The son of Guatemalan immigrants, he is a native of Los Angeles, where he lives with his family.

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