

**Overview** *The Underdogs* is one of several novels written by the Mexican novelist Mariano Azuela (1873-1952). A doctor by profession, he was born one of seven siblings to a businessman who owned a small grocery store. He went to University in Guadalajara, the capital of his state, and there began serious writing, as well as his medical studies. Drawn to the political positions of President Madero (1911-1913), he joined (as a doctor) the army of Pancho Villa but when that army was defeated, Azuela was obliged to go into exile, in El Paso, Texas. Once back in Mexico, he moved with his wife to Mexico City, where he worked as a doctor and produced some two dozen novels.

**Character** Demetrio Macias is one of a rough band of locals, vigilantes, and rebels who get caught up in a life and death struggle against the Government troops under siege during the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821). He was dragged into this struggle when his house was burned down by the Federales, and kept involved by the experiences he and his band encounter as they travel (pillage, harvest, rape) their way around rebel territories in central Mexico. Their struggle, loosely focused on opposition to President Huerta (d. 1916), becomes increasingly disorganized as problems internal to their structureless band destroy their morale. Demetrio finally makes it home, to wife and family and to death in a burst of gunfire.

**Parallels** As a hard bitten but ultimately beaten 'hero' of the Mexican Revolution, Demetrio symbolizes the determined man of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary explosions: in Mexico, Russia, Spain, in the East Block and Cuba, and soon China. Demetrio's struggles take us to the world of Che Guevara, whose *Guerilla Warfare* (1961) parallels the tough day by day fight of the Revolution; to the mindset of an original genius like Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), whose *Letters from Prison* inscribed his complex fidelity to the workers' Revolution; to Bukharin's *How it all Begun* (1937), a prison novel of his life as a revolutionary, and a vivid testimony to the brutality of Stalinism.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Attacked** We first meet Demetrio in the course of an assault on his farmstead, by the Federales. We get a brief look at him—'tall, robust, with a reddish-brown face and beardless chin, he wore a shirt and pants of rough white cloth, a palm-leaf sombrero, and guaraches'—but not much more because this initial scene, like much of the book, depicts chaos and confusion. In the present assault scene Demetrio escapes into the night, leaving behind his family, his house, and his dog, who has just been shot dead by the intruders.

**Formidable** Demetrio is a formidable if simple character. The intruding band, at the outset of the above attack, moves in quickly on his family—sexually aggressive toward Demetrio's wife—but then, as they realize the guy is still there, they shrink back. 'Suddenly a white silhouette appeared in the darkened doorway. "Demetrio Macias"! the sergeant exclaimed taking some steps backward in fright.' 'Oh forgive us, friend! I didn't know it was you. Believe me, I respect the truly brave.' When the men vanish Demetrio sends his wife away, to his father's house. He knows violence will be following.

**Despair** Demetrio sent his wife and child to his father's house,' Her parting from Demetrio was sad and open-ended. 'At each peak, and on each ascent, Demetrio gazed upon the doleful silhouette of a woman bearing a child in her arms...When, after many hours of climbing, he looked back, he saw flames rising at the bottom of the canyon, near the river. It was his house on fire.' The cinematic vignette frames the whole frozen despair of the seat-of-the-pants revolutionary spasms the novel brilliantly interprets.

**Shy** Demetrio follows the course of skirmishes, escapes, and near capture, as he leads his band across the rocky Sierra of Central Mexico. Wherever the gang comes to rest they take what they can get, including the women. Demetrio is attractive to the women he meets, but as a basically faithful husband, and mountain tough, he is easily embarrassed by the ladies. 'Demetrio raised his eyes toward her. They

looked each other in the eyes like two strange dogs sniffing one another in distrust. Demetrio wasn't able to keep up with the girl's furiously provocative gaze, and lowered his eyes.'

### **Discussion questions**

Does Demetrio understand the politics and economics of the national change he is fighting for, or is he too far down on the totem pole of actors, to have a comprehensive view of his actions?

Is Demetrio himself a conservative, when it comes to life, habits, behavior, women? What are his own cultural roots?

Demetrio is clearly respected by many of the fighters from his region? What do they respect him for? Are they afraid of him, or is he a model for them?