

# Always Running

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LUIS J. RODRIGUEZ

Luis Rodriguez grew up in South Los Angeles in the 1940s. As a teenager, he was active in the Lomas gang, one of the largest Latin gangs in Los Angeles. In 1970, he and other gang members marched through East Los Angeles to protest the Vietnam War, and in the following years, he became active in the Chicano movement. While continuing many of his gang activities— including violence and heavy drug use— he organized student walk-outs and protests. At the age of eighteen, he decided to quit drugs and study political philosophy for the rest of his life. In the 1980s, he began working as a freelance journalist, covering topics as diverse as Chicago's recent Peoria Slam scene and the Contra War in Nicaragua. In 1992, he published his memoir *Always Running: Las Pintas*. He's written poetry, children's books, novels, and a second memoir called *I Call It My Back*. In 1997, his son Ramiro (for whom *Always Running* is dedicated) was arrested and sentenced to eight years in three counts of attempted murder; however, he was released in 2010. In 2014, Rodriguez was named the First Laureate of Los Angeles.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the years following World War II, there was a sudden influx of immigrants into the United States from Latin American countries, especially Mexico. Particularly in the 1960s, Mexican-Americans entered the United States in record numbers, settling primarily in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and California. Causes of the immigration spike include increased poverty and violence in Mexico, and the relative prosperity of the United States. The consequences of this immigration spike were numerous. A large Chicano (Mexican-American) agricultural worker in the southwestern United States, and Chicano political activists such as César Chávez and Felipe López Tijerina fought for Mexican-American civil rights. Some important political causes for the Chicano civil rights movement included the organization of farm workers in the central valley of California and the reform of the public school system, which activists argued disadvantaged Latino students. Another consequence of Latino immigration, however, was a surge in gang violence in Los Angeles, among other cities. Especially in the 70s and 80s, with the rise of the crack epidemic, gang violence increased dramatically. Two other specific historical events are heavily reported in Luis's memoir: the Watts Rebellion of 1965 and the Los Angeles Riots (or "looting") as Rodriguez vividly describes. On August 11, 1965, a black man named Marquette Frye was arrested by LAPD officers for drunk driving. In the ensuing

struggle, Frye was seriously injured, and the officers used excessive force to subdue him. Accusers of the LAPD's brutality circulated, angry crowds formed to protest the police's racist policies and actions. The California National Guard was called to intervene, supposedly to keep the peace, but over the next six days the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles became a virtual war zone. Protesters did tens of millions of dollars of property damage, and more than thirty people were killed in the struggle between the protesters and the troops. The Los Angeles Uprising of 1962 began in a similar fashion: a black man named Rodney King was pulled over for speeding, and four police officers brutally beat him. After the four officers were acquitted of any wrongdoing, a riot broke out throughout the city, beginning first in black and Latino residents of the city. Over the next few days, more than sixty people were killed.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Rodriguez's memoir bears an interesting resemblance to Father Gregory Boyle's *Tattler on the Beach* (2010), another memoir about gang violence in Los Angeles, though written from the perspective of a priest, not a gang affiliate. Like Luis, Boyle takes a harsh view of gang culture, though his later on-gang life in Luis's memoir is more sympathetic. Speaking of which, Luis makes reference to several publications that were especially popular in the 1980s. These include *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and Edridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (also 1965), a memoir on black oppression that inspired many Marxist ideas. And of course, it's worth reading Mar's novel before diving into Rodriguez's memoir. *The Constant Murders* is both Mar's most famous text on working-class oppression and the book that arguably has the greatest relevance to Luis's take on them. Finally, although it's not literary work, readers are encouraged to watch Agnes Varda's documentary movie *Museum 1962*, a beautiful and insightful film about Chicano culture in Los Angeles in the '70s and '80s.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*
- **When Written:** Early '80s
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **When Published:** 1992
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Los Angeles, mostly in the 1940s and 1970s
- **Character:** Luis Rodriguez (his alter-ego), Chico

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**Ted Padova**



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