

# **Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A Study Guide**

**Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A by  
Luis J. Rodriguez**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.

# Contents

<a href="#">Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1 and 2.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 3 and 4.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 5 and 6.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7 and 8.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 9 and 10.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>

# Plot Summary

Luis begins by remembering a day when he is nine years old and his family is on its way to Union Station. He says his mother has purchased him a new comic book, his father is refusing to return to Mexico and his mother is angry. She doesn't leave, but Luis notes that he's nothing more than a ball, bouncing wherever, and that it makes little difference.

Luis attends school but is treated with disdain as the teachers have no idea how to handle a student who isn't able to speak English. Luis, fearing he won't be understood, simply doesn't speak. As a result, he does poorly in school and soon finds himself in trouble on a regular basis. He notes that he and his friends form a "gang" for the same reasons most are formed - a combination of common interests and protection. Thee Impersonations are the first of these though he later joins The Animal Tribe, earning his nickname, "Chin," by suffering through a broken jaw.

Luis watches as boys and girls are murdered and families torn apart as a result of gang violence. He endures, clinging to hope that life can change. Through it all, he continues to follow his fellow gang members, feeling that to do otherwise would be to let them down. With that hanging over him, he helps firebomb the house of a rival gang member though he knows the gang member's family are inside.

Then he's given a chance to show his worth through a community center. With a job and a mentor, Luis comes to believe in himself. A teacher who has read some of his writing sends a sample in to a contest and Luis emerges the winner - a \$250 prize representing the largest chunk of cash he's ever come by honestly. He is soon painting murals through another city-based program, and on his way to a broadcast journalism degree. Then he sees police beating a Chicano woman and intervenes, earning himself a charge of assault on a police officer. He loses time in school and contracts for art projects along with a book contract.

While living at the very edges of the gang, he refuses to partake in a cigarette laced with PCP and is rewarded by seeing others also refuse. Just as he's imagining the good he could do with these young men, other gang members approach and shoot at him - missing on purpose but making their warning perfectly clear.

Luis is aided in his escape from the neighborhood and later marries and has a child. At a family gathering, he is approached by a disfigured member of a rival gang member, bent on revenge. Luis says he would gladly give his life to ease the suffering, but urges forgiveness instead. As he says, it's time to live the life that remains.

# Chapters 1 and 2

## Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter One

Luis begins by remembering a day when he is nine and the family is on the way to Union Station. He says his mother has purchased him a new comic book, his father is refusing to return to Mexico and his mother is angry. Luis then flashes back to the history of the family and earlier memories. He says that his father met his mother in Indiana while participating in a foreign study program. His father, forty at the time he married Luis's mother, had children from previous relationships. Luis recounts the story that his half-sister, Seni, was left with her grandmother for so long that she didn't recognize her father when he returned.

After his parents are married, Luis's father is jailed for allegedly stealing money from the school where he works as principal. He is eventually found innocent but vows to leave the country. Luis says his mother never wanted to leave Mexico, but agrees. The family settles in Los Angeles, in Watts. His first memories are while the family lived in a "matchbox of a place" on 105th Street in Watts. He says that it's there he and his older brother, Rano, play, usually with Luis being hurt. While Luis gets the brunt of Rano's anger, Rano gets the same from other boys in the streets.

Luis says Christmases "came with barely a whimper," and that on the rare occasion he got toys, he purposefully broke them, feeling that it "didn't seem right to have things that were in working order." His mother works sometimes, usually taking care of children or cleaning houses. He notes that his mother is often ill but that it's she who holds the family up each time things fall apart.

Luis begins school, first with a teacher who objects to having him in her class and next in a class where the teacher has him play blocks till she can figure out what to do with him. Luis says he plays with those blocks most of the year. Even when he begins to learn English, he simply doesn't talk for fear of being misunderstood.

Luis's father is educated but can find nothing other than common labor jobs in America. Then he's hired as a substitute teacher and the family moves to a better neighborhood, buys a better house and furniture, and buys a set of false teeth for Mama. Luis says that it lasted less than a year but his father wasn't employed again because the students apparently couldn't understand his accent. Luis says their possessions are crammed in a garage and the family moves in with his half-sister, Seni. The situation is bad with the family constantly fighting. One night, Luis and Rano come home to find the police at their house. Seni and her husband had been in a fight and she'd cut him with a nail file. The family is soon evicted and this leads to the situation in which Luis, his mother and siblings are on the way to Union Station. Mama soon realizes that she can't leave him.

Luis says he's indifferent. He describes himself as a ball, bouncing "wherever." After that, a poverty agency helps the family find a house with an affordable rent.

Luis says the neighborhoods become known as "barrios," that the families usually worked as field laborers, and that the neighborhoods become "incubators of rebellion" where police never come without backup. It's in this environment that Luis becomes involved with a gang, though he notes that it's not called a gang, but a club or a clique. He becomes involved in the formation of a clique called "Thee Impersonations," led by Miguel Robles and born of the necessity of a large group for protection and of the desire to have the power Luis has seen among other young gangs.

When Luis's father gets a job as a laboratory technician at a community college in Los Angeles, the family moves into a larger home and Luis begins attending school at Richard Garvey Intermediate School. He's away from other members of his clique here, and notes that he's on his own. Garvey had only hand-me-down books and few supplies, and had the worst drop-out rate and test scores in the state. What Luis pays attention to there are the girls and the "East L.A. style." Luis goes through a series of girlfriends, including one who is "straight and proper," but none last long. He describes the teachers, mostly misfits, including the 80-year-old English teacher who doesn't notice when the class throws books and desks through an open window while she writes on the board, or the shop teacher who turns to discipline the class and cuts a finger off with a band saw. At thirteen, Luis is assigned to a class of other young trouble-makers who will clean graffiti off walls and pick up litter. His father attempts to ground him but Luis merely sneaks out anyway.

While Luis is getting in trouble, is sexually active, has a tattoo and is involved in the drug scene, Rano, 16, is excelling at sports, has made up some lost grades, is playing guitar with garage bands, is a budding young actor, and drops his nickname and his Mexican name to become "Joe." Luis is initially involved in a gang called Thee Impersonations, and later in The Animal Tribe. Luis says The Tribe absorbs many of the smaller gangs, including Thee Impersonations. Joaquin Lopez is the leader. Luis and his friends continue to claim a clique of their own until The Tribe and a rival gang, the Sangras, begin to class. Miguel Robles, a former leader of Thee Impersonations who later becomes a general in The Tribe, says that Luis and his friends have to choose to belong to either The Tribe or the Sangras, or risk being tortured by both. Luis agrees to join The Tribe. That night, as Miguel speaks for them, Luis sees a girl having sex and is told she's "being initiated" into The Tribe.

---

Luis says that the language barrier was a serious problem. He says that while his family struggled with English, he created an imaginary world in which he played with mangled toys, and that he "must have looked scary."

Luis says that his family crossed the Rio Grande and that it's a symbol of the many borders and barriers in their paths. He recalls his mother taking the children to Will

Rogers Park and a white lady chasing them away, screaming that it isn't their country. He says that would echo in his mind for the rest of his life.

Luis talks about the fact that his brother was placed in a class with retarded children because he can't speak English. It's a situation that will be repeated when Luis begins school and the teacher tells him to play with blocks until she can figure out what to do with him, and that he spends most of the year playing with blocks.

Luis says he and Rano were sent to the store and that Rano insists they go to a store where people from Watts are not supposed to be. On the way back, they're attacked. Luis is held while Rano is beaten. When the beating is over, the only thing that concerns Rano is that Luis never tell anyone that Rano cried.

Luis tells of an incident in which he and his friend, Tino, jumped a chain link fence to play basketball on a school yard. When the police arrive, the two run and Tino falls to his death through a skylight on a roof. What's interesting is that Luis doesn't identify Tino, explain how they met, or tell why they were friends. He also doesn't say how Tino's death impacted him, which could be an indication of the depth of his feeling. It's up to the reader to decide. What Luis does say is that he and Tino ran. He says that the running "never stopped" and that they ran from police, gangs, junkies and bullies. He completes that thought by saying that they were "always afraid."

# Chapters 3 and 4

## Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

Luis describes his life as part of the gang, saying that he and his friends are in a vacant lot they had claimed as their own, furnished with old sofas and covered by plastic to keep off at least some of the rain when an old car comes by. Two of the group go to the street to get a better look and one, Clavo, is shot in the face. Even as he's being taken to the hospital, members of The Tribe are preparing for war. Clavo loses an eye in the shooting and Luis saying he is also bound to have lost his nerve. He later disappears without a trace. When he returns from the hospital, Luis says he knows Clavo wants out but Luis and the others hold onto him. To celebrate Clavo's arrival home, they plan a trip to a "real beach" - one of those claimed by the whites and not the beach used by the people of the barrios. They find a deserted stretch of beach, drink and pass around some joints, throwing girls into the water and playing. When some whites arrive, Luis and his friends believe them to be there to surf, noting that there's constant friction between "surfers and beaners." When one of Luis's friends, Black Dog, takes up the challenge to fight, they discover that the new arrivals are police. They are all taken into custody for the alcohol and drugs on the beach. They are later released, except Black Dog who has previous arrests and is taken to juvenile detention.

Luis says that at nine his mother believes he has to find a job to help the family. He and Rano do many jobs, ranging from cleaning houses, lawns, pools and garages to paper routes. While Luis is a champion at paper delivery, he is never able to excel at subscription selling except in the poor neighborhoods where people sign up to receive the free gift and never pay to renew. He later works at a carwash, cleaning up in the evening with Rano who also washes cars. They give all the money to their mother and Luis notes that there is always a need to for more.

As a teenager and after Clavo leaves the neighborhood, Luis becomes friends with a young man named Claudio Ponce, known as Yuk Yuk because of his distinctive laugh. It's Yuk Yuk who introduces Luis to stealing. Luis says he has stolen before but never anything big and never with any planning. With Yuk Yuk leading, meet a man named Jandro Mares, a "30-year-old budding entrepreneur" who has the teens steal specific cars on order, drive them back to Jandro's garage and strip them down. They also steal bikes, jewelry, electronics and other items for a man named Shed Cowager who pays cash for almost anything they can steal. They soon graduate to residential burglary and robbing convenience stores.

Luis notes that Yuk Yuk says a thief must be willing to do what needs to be done without thinking. Luis says that he is able to pull a gun and that he believes he could kill, but not as part of a theft. Yuk Yuk calls this a problem and warns Luis that he could wind up dead. One night they decide to robe the concession stand and encounter an old man who swears he can't open the safe. Yuk Yuk seems unwilling to leave it until someone

else arrives and begins shooting, chasing them all away. Luis will much later paint a mural on that same concession stand.

Luis attends Mark Keppel High School where he notes that the students are divided by race and social class and that teachers favored the whites, whether they did so consciously or not.

Luis saves for a saxophone and is tenacious in learning to play. There comes the day when Joe accuses Luis of having taken records without permission and Luis says Joe always takes things without asking. Joe steps on Luis's saxophone. The boys fight and their father breaks it up. Joe doesn't return home for three days. Luis says he doesn't have the money to have the saxophone repaired or to buy a new one, and that all he can think about is the loss.

It's during an annual festival celebrating the Mexican heritage that Luis and a friend slip into Sangra territory to go to a carnival. There Luis meets Vivian and is immediately infatuated. They ride the Ferris wheel together and afterwards go on a rooftop as it becomes evident that there's to be a fight between the Lomas and the Sangras. Luis feels torn, citing the need to be with his homeboy during the fight, but Vivian urges him to avoid the fight and remain with her.

Luis says that there is race trouble at the beginning of every school year. As he enters tenth grade, he and his friends show up at a football game and hassle some white people, taking money from one group and taunting several. As they leave the game, police stop them and question where they've been. One teen, Carlitos, asks why the Mexicans are always being harassed and is eventually taken down by police, in a choke hold that leaves him blue and unconscious. Paramedics arrive but police won't let them touch Carlitos. That treatment begins a riot. After the police are driven away and the paramedics leave with Carlitos, Luis and his friends find themselves with no where to run except into the stadium. They fight their way through, attacking mostly white groups that include some adult men as well. Luis later finds himself walking some girls home, and turns them over to some Mexicans he doesn't know as he turns toward his own home. He's chased by whites in a Jeep, but escapes. The fighting continues at school. During one incident, the police arrive to break up a fight, the whites leave without a problem and the Mexicans arrested or expelled. Luis says that action was "fine with me," because he hates school and loves to fight.

Luis's mother is finally fed up with pulling him out of jail and watching him in trouble, and kicks him out of the house. He stays with others for awhile, sometimes sleeping in all-night movie houses with winos or in abandoned cars or fields. He eventually negotiates a truce with his mother, sleeping in a room in the garage though is has no bathroom and no heat. Luis begins sniffing, getting high on an array of spray intoxicants. Then one night he almost dies, and says that he is pulled back by two friends who are also high but who managed to respond in time. Later, he is in his garage bedroom with a razor, planning to cut his wrist and allow himself to bleed out into a trash can so that his mother won't have to clean up the mess. It's while standing there, near suicide, that he realizes that he's alive for a purpose and that "it all had meaning." One morning his



sister wakes him and he goes into his mother's kitchen. There, he speaks to her in Spanish - a rule she can never enforce - and asks if he can stay for breakfast. She says that he is welcome any time he can enter with respect.

---

Luis describes a cousin, Pancho, who convinced a ten-year-old Luis to pump weights and eat foods to deal with the fact that he's so skinny. Luis suffers a hernia and has to have surgery. It's decided that while he's in the hospital having the procedure, he should be circumcised. Luis says that while still in the hospital, he experiences severe pain which prompts another procedure on his penis. He says he feared he would never "be a man," but that he eventually healed.

Luis says that the members of his gang typically end gang graffiti with the words The Tribe, then some want to add Lomas. While some want to use both words, some just claim Lomas. It seems this is a foreshadowing of a break within the gang. Luis also talks about gang names. He will become known as "Chin" because of his jutting chin - the effects of a fractured jaw during a gang initiation.

Luis describes, in great detail, the effects of a high from "sniffing" intoxicants including various sprays and gas. In particular, he tells about gaining an incredible high that includes a wonderful light. He says that when he wakes from the high, he reaches for the bag, but his friends - Baba and Wilo - refuse to allow him another sniff, saying that he had stopped breathing during that high. Luis says that they don't understand, that he wanted to return to that place, and that he wishes he had died. Later, Luis begins dating Wilo's younger sister, Payasa. Luis notes that she is constantly seeking the high from sniffing. It's interesting that he can see what it's doing to her and notes that she is out of control, but can't seem to see the same in himself. Soon after he breaks up with her, she is admitted to a rehabilitation center for additions. Later, Wilo and Payasa leave the Barrior for what they hope is a better life. Payasa calls Luis one day with the news that Wilo was killed at age 15. Payasa winds up pregnant and "imprisoned" in marriage.

# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

Luis says that The Animal Tribe begins a quick decline with the death of its leader, seventeen-year-old John Fabela. He is shot to death in his living room while his brother watches from under a bed. John's girlfriend is pregnant with his daughter at the time of his death. With that change, the Lomas come to power but members must be initiated. Luis joins by taking a beating. He notes that one eye is swollen shut and his ribs hurt, but adheres to the notion that he did well through the beating. Later, drunk and still regarded a new recruit, he goes with a group who jump on some white guys - not gang members but just out for a joy ride. Luis, at the urging of a gang leader named Puppet, stabs one of the men with a screwdriver.

As gang violence escalates, media coverage increases and several community centers emerge in an effort to address the problems. Luis notes that the workers put in 80-hour weeks, fight impossible conditions and enter disputes armed with nothing but a prayer. The workers include minorities who manage to beat the odds and have an education in their favor. It's one of these who works at a center in Lomas territory - a man named Chente Ramirez - who attracts Luis's attention. His counterpart at the Sangra center is Sal Basuto. Sal feels for the Sangras because they are a small group constantly at odd with those around them and constantly forced to be tougher to make up for their small numbers. Luis, who goes to that center for awhile until he fears someone will figure out he's a Lomas, says Sal knows that someday the Sangras will pay the price for their ferocity.

One night, a member of the Lomas known as Little Man is shot and killed by a member of the Sangras. Luis is awakened the following night to help exact revenge on the Sangras. Luis quickly realizes the plan is to firebomb a house, which puts innocent lives in jeopardy but which is a typical part of the current situation. He also notes that police presence is heavy, but that a failure to react immediately will be taken as a sign of weakness. Luis and his group firebomb the home of one of the Sangra's main warriors, though he is known to be staying with his girlfriend. Luis worries that someone will be killed, but says he feels traps and goes along. The papers report that all inside escape but the house is a total loss.

At 13, Luis is turned away by the gang members using hard drugs, forcing him to find solace in alcohol and lighter drugs, including sniffing. After his near-death experience, he stops sniffing but searches for other highs to fill that void. By 15, he's allowed a taste of heroine. With time to kill, he and some friends learn that they can go to a high school, claim to be an incoming student, choose classes and attend for a day in order to meet girls.

Luis meets a girl named Roberta and at one point says that he fell in love with her. They spend hours together, making love, but Roberta sometimes simply isn't around. It's

when Luis pushes Roberta's sister for information that he finds out she's a prostitute and is out making money to pay for living with her sister, and to help support her sister's drug habit. When Roberta's sister, Frankie, tells Luis these details, Luis is angry and Frankie takes him to her bedroom, closing the door behind them.

Luis has a sister, Lisa, who died as a baby. Luis says he has a recurring dream in which he goes into a room and sees Lisa as she appears in the photo his mother keeps in an album. Usually the dream ends at that point. On this particular night, the dream continues and Lisa screams. Luis awakes and discovers that the screams are coming from his sister, Gloria's room. She has a burst appendix and they arrive at the hospital with her just in time to save her.

Luis's mother wants him to attend school and calls on a man who helped Joe excel. Mr. Rothro discovers that Luis is laboriously writing a book with an old typewriter he found and says that he'll help Luis in any way he can. About this time, Luis's father comes up with a plan for Luis to attend high school near the community college where he works. Luis agrees and soon discovers that his father - who is the "king" of their home - is nothing more than a janitor. Luis says the knowledge impacted him greatly.

Luis does attend Taft High School, but is refused admittance to the classes he wants and placed in industrial classes instead. In the evenings, he sometime waits in the library for his father and it's there that he eventually picks up books by authors including Eldridge Cleaver and Piri Thomas. These turn to an appreciation for other writers. Though Luis drops out of school, he says that he learns to understand his father's ways and that he comes to appreciate that his father gave him the gift of "a world of books."

One day Chente approaches Luis, telling him there's to be a position available through a new program called Neighborhood Youth Corps. He also says that there's to be a new principal at the local high school and encourages Luis to consider going back to school. Luis becomes involved in the NYC and is soon also active in programs, sometimes volunteering his time to bring food for the food co-op and handing out groceries to families in need. A man named Daniel Fuentes begins offering boxing classes and forms a team supported by a featherweight boxer named Ruben Navarro. Ruben wants the team to win and Luis says the practices "turn up a few notches" whenever Ruben comes to watch. When Luis takes on a fighter in an important match, he throws his punches too quickly too early and is tired before the round is over so that he can't even begin to defend himself in the remaining two rounds of the match and loses.

—

Luis says that by the 1970s, as a young man in his mid-teens, he is becoming frustrated with his lack of control over anything in his life.

Word about Luis's involvement get around and he's "marked," meaning the Sangras want to kill him. His younger sister, Gloria, who wants to be part of the gang life like Luis, is recognized as Luis's sister one night and she and her friends are shot at as they managed to escape. He notes the reluctance to firebomb a house that might result in

innocent lives, but seems unwilling - or unable - to escape the gang life that is putting his own family in danger. It's interesting that Luis has never expressed his own level of commitment to the gang, but does say that he knows he can't say no when asked to participate in a particular raid or gang event. He does, however, say he believes his sister's interest to be a phase that she will outgrow.

Luis says that rape becomes a way of life among the gangs. He cites an instance in which friends have two girls in a van and when the girls are high or drunk, the boys have sex with the girls who are unable to rouse themselves to even protest. Luis says he doesn't participate. It's up to the reader to determine whether Luis tells the entire truth at times such as this. It's also interesting that Luis admits that they were all searching for death, but simply didn't know it at the time. He says that all their hours drinking, doing drugs and fighting were quests for death.

One day, Luis and his friends stop at Jorge's Junk Yard to see the remains of the car being driven by Yuk Yuk during a robbery. In the high speed chase after the robbery, Yuk Yuk wrecked and he and his passenger, a gang member named Daddio, were killed. Luis begins studying with a group Chente calls "the collective." One day Luis can't get his mind on the words or the conversation. His friends, which consist of people outside the gang striving for a better life and one man studying to be a doctor, take notice. Luis says that he has needed to get high since the deaths of Yuk Yuk and Daddio. Chente says that Luis has to make a decision - that he is with the group working for a better way of life, or that he isn't. Chente tells Luis that he doesn't have to meet with the group. Finally, Chente says that if Luis survives and thrives, they all do so. In this way, this group is like a gang. But Chente adds that if Luis goes down, he's on his own, meaning that the group won't allow Luis to pull them all down. It will be through this group that Luis eventually comes to understand that there's no disgrace in being a janitor.

# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

Luis gets caught up in the riots against the Vietnam war in the 1970s and spends some time in jail, lost in the system for a period and released with no trial and no fanfare. He's held with accused murderers, including Charles Manson. Luis notes that the gang wars pause while the youth protest Vietnam. After his release, he encounters Vivian. Her brothers are hardcore gang members but the attraction between the two is vital and strong. Luis says there is an inhibition between them that breaks one night on the front porch of her house, but afterwards she cries and tells him to leave. She refuses his phone calls. When he sees her at a dance one night, she leaves, saying she'll be right back. He waits more than an hour before realizing she isn't coming back. When he finds her in the arms of another boy, he's angry enough to start a fight but doesn't.

Luis is a group of about twenty who meet with Mr. Madison, the new principal of Mark Keppel High School, as he discusses planned changes to the school. When school starts, Luis is among those attending. The students begin an organization called ToHMAS - To Help Mexican American Students. The school mascot is a male and female student, each dressed like an Aztec Indian. Luis notes that they typically do tumbling routines, trip over each other and act silly. At the urging of other members of ToHMAS, Luis and Esme Falcon try out for the role, presenting traditional Aztec dances as their routine. They win. Luis notes that it may not seem a huge victory, but that it was a sign that the barriers were coming down, and that it was an important sign.

At a party one night, some members of the Lomas say they were accosted by a group of bikers. A gang member named Santos leads a group on an attack but one of the bikers emerges with a shotgun and Luis joins those running away. Later, Santos tells Luis to get a gun and car. Santos says he'll drive by the house and instructs Luis to come by about five minutes later. Luis does so with a borrowed gun and with his younger sister's thirteen-year-old friend accompanying him, and is caught by the police. Santos escapes. Luis is held, facing charges of attempted murder. Chente says he doesn't understand why Luis had to become involved and Luis says only that the bikers shouldn't have messed with his gang. It's while he's in jail that Luis learns that Viviana got "knocked up" and is living with a guy. Luis isn't charged because the bikers, in their own quest for revenge against a half-Mexican named Roger, identifies him as the shooter, but he is found not guilty.

The question of how to stop gang violence prompts a meeting of neighborhood adults, some who want the "hoodlums" jailed. A meeting of the gangs is planned. Then a member of the Sangra, a tough, outspoken girl named Cokie, is found brutally murdered. Luis admits that the crime shakes some of them who wonder about the depths people will go. The meeting is called off.

Time passes and there are more small strides. A dance is arranged and no weapons allowed. Luis and Esme perform as mascots. A successful soccer team is formed and Mexicans join in both that sport and as varsity players.

One day, Chente visits Luis's garage bedroom and looks at the murals. Luis says he believes Chente is critical but realizes he sees raw talent. He presents Luis with a book of murals and tells Luis that there is to be a new project in which the city pays for paints and a group will paint murals on exterior building walls. Luis leads a team, learns to create miniature sketches then to prepare walls and replicate them on a wall, and where to buy the best paints and the best discounts.

At this same time, Miguel Robles is out of the violence of gangs but remains respected by both. One evening, police stop and search Miguel and friends, then spot his brother, Mooney, who has outstanding warrants. One officer chases Mooney in the house and Miguel follows. In the scuffle, Miguel is shot and the entire family injured. The gangs have a cause - justice for Miguel. Another community meeting is planned. Representatives of the Lomas and Sangras sign a paper declaring a truce and calling for a reprimand from the gang of any member who violates the truce. Then a gang member named Chava shows up and has a fight with Santos. In the midst of the fight, word comes that Miguel is dead.

Violence rises, this time against police. A police cruiser is riddled with gunfire and a chopper brought down. One summer afternoon, Santos stands in a yard on Graves Avenue, talking to Indio - a father of two. A car cruises by and the two men are killed, the three-year-old son a witness to the crime. Rumors abound that the shooters were Sangra and despite efforts to cool tempers, war looms again. Luis believes the shooters were the police, out to stop the uniting of Lomas and Sangra. As Lomas make plans to hit the Sangras, Luis tries to make that point but is hit in the face and subtly threatened.

—

Luis becomes more involved with students at his school. He writes three one-act plays, one that calls for a halt of the violence between Sangras and Lomas. In his play, the Sangras and Lomas are fighting on one side of the stage while city officials on the other debate the fate of the land the gangs are fighting over. Luis says that no one wants to play the role of the gang member who crosses out the Sangra's gang signs, and that he takes that role. He says some object, but some talk about what can be done to end the warfare. Later, Luis and the others of ToHMAS stage a walk-out that gains the attention of school officials and ends with an assembly involving the whole school. Luis notes that there was a lot of yelling, but that it got anger into the open and forced some conversation that had to happen.

Luis talks about the procreation of children of the barrio. He says young girls are denied love at home and seek it elsewhere, soon becoming mothers themselves. The chain continues with them denying the warmth to their own children then. He says that boys are fathers at a young age, but with less responsibilities. Meanwhile, children grow up without a father figure and cry for milk while mothers shoot up.



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

Luis says the conditions at school continue to be better, but change comes slowly. As a senior, he intervenes when a teacher calls a student a whore. Violence erupts again and a Chicano teacher is fired. Luis stages another walk-out but Mr. Madison calls for an assembly at that time. As he sits in the bleachers listening to Mr. Madison talk about the need for harmony and understanding, Luis realizes that he caused this assembly - that he failed to achieve the walkout but he was heard.

As a senior, one of Luis's teachers sends his work in to a literary contest and he wins \$250 and a plane ticket to Berkley - the largest chunk of legitimately-earned money he's ever held. He is hired by a college professor to paint a mural. He's given a grant for college. He graduates high school but says it has little to do with him. In 1972, he begins college, buys a "lowrider Volkswagen," works at an array of jobs to help pay the cost of college, continues to live in the garage bedroom and majors in broadcast journalism and Chicano studies. He begins seeing a girl who claims to be pregnant with his child, but she disappears and he never learns either her fate or whether the child was his.

One day Luis sees police beating a woman and intervenes. He's also arrested, beaten and eventually taken to jail. The woman, Licha Rubalcava, is the mother of three and her husband is in jail. They are in court together and agree that whoever makes bail first will visit the other. Luis is the first who gathers enough money to gain his freedom. He finds that Licha has been tagged a suicide risk and he urges her to be strong. Luis, faced with the prospect of a trial that involves his word against those of the arresting officers, agrees to a plea bargain and spends a few months in county jail. His book deal is put off because of turmoil in the publishing company and he loses his mural contract. For the principle, he doesn't want the officers to get away with beating him after he was already in custody, but finally decides that he simply wants out of the mess. Licha invites him home with her and he spends a weekend there, noting that he's forgotten a previous girlfriend and everything he was striving for, and is back on his way into the life of his neighborhood. After the first weekend, Licha refuses to see him again, saying he's too young for her.

One day, fellow gang members stop in front of Luis and fire shots at him from point blank range. He isn't hit and realizes that they didn't mean to kill, but to warn. Luis asks Chente for help escaping from the gang.

Luis says things change rapidly. On a trip to visit his parents he finds that the area nearby is being developed with malls and expensive housing. A police raid on Keppel High School prompts parental action but an officer accused of abuse is found not guilty and transferred where he soon faces similar charges related to the beating of a black youth. He marries Camilla in 1974. At a party for one of his cousins, Luis steps outside.

Chava limps up, showing Luis the scars inflicted by the Lomas so long ago and saying that somebody has to pay for it. Luis says that if his life would heal Chava's pain, he would give it. He urges Chava to let the hate go, move on and live the life he has left. He then holds Chava as he cries. Chava limps away and Luis equates it with the "final tempo of the crazy life" he has lived.

---

Luis has a conversation with Chente one day in which he says that he has to remain here, to defend his neighborhood. Chente tells Luis that he has to see the world. To prove his point, he takes out a globe and tells Luis to point out Lomas. Luis admits that it's so tiny, it doesn't even warrant a dot on that globe.

Just before Luis is warned with the shots from fellow gang members, he refuses a cigarette laced with angel dust. After his refusal, others refuse and he's momentarily excited about the prospect of changing lives.



# Characters

## Luis

Also known as Grillo, or Cricket, the name given him by his father at birth, Luis became known as Chin while in a gang because of the prominence of the chin caused by a broken jaw as part of a gang initiation. Luis's talents are writing and painting, but he has trouble with formal education from an early age. He recalls the understanding that his first teacher doesn't want him and that his second doesn't know what to do with him. He soon joins a gang, seemingly both for companionship and protection. He moves into another, larger gang as his small clique falls by the wayside. He's involved in gang activity, including the firebombing of the house of a rival gang member.

When he's given a new chance at education, recognized for his writing and painting, and put in a leadership role among his peers, he excels. He fights against injustices to his people and finds a heady power in his ability to push for action. While he watches the gang activity around him, he grows sad and weary. Having seen deaths and violence, he comes to realize that the gang way isn't the right way. He wants out and takes that step after a warning in the form of shots fired directly at him.

## Maria Estela

Luis notes that his Mama is nothing like his father. While Luis's father wants Luis to explain his actions, his Mama turns to the belt and to mantras of "Mather-Mother-of-Jesus." Luis explains his mother's actions by saying that it's as if she felt that going through the pain of childbirth and the years of diapers and childhood, she has the right to make him behave. Luis says that his Mama hates the alcohol and drugs that make up the lives of many of the young men Luis hangs around with.

Luis's mother is a loving woman who seems to care deeply for Luis but isn't at all afraid to discipline him. When he continues to get into trouble, she comes to the decision to kick him out of her house. When Luis is later in trouble for stealing food from a restaurant, he tells the owner that his mother kicked him out, but that it was because he kept messing up and that he doesn't blame her. When Luis considers suicide, he notes that he's going to let his wrists bleed out into a trash can, knowing that his mother would be upset about the mess. After Luis almost commits suicide, he goes into his mother's kitchen, kisses her and asks if he can stay for breakfast. She tells him that he's welcome, as long as he's respectful.

## Alfonso

Luis's father. Luis notes that his father is a philosopher and that Poncho deals with Luis's behavior issues at school in that way. For example, when Luis is in trouble at Garvey, his father makes him explain why. Luis says that he has to deal with his father



by using his brain, and that it's never easy. He also notes that he can seldom explain his actions.

## Jose Rene

Luis's oldest full brother. Also called Rano, meaning "frog." Jose eventually drops the "s" in his name to become known as Joe. Luis notes that the two are three years apart in age and worlds apart otherwise. While Luis is getting in trouble and in danger of being expelled, Joe is excelling in school, in sports and in music. The boys are close while they are young. For example, Luis describes an incident in which two boys are saying that Joe cheats to win at track and Luis defends his brother, earning himself a broken jaw. When Joe says Luis doesn't need to defend him, Luis says he did it because he loves Joe.

## Miguel Robles

The young man who becomes the leader of the clique known as "Thee Impersonators." Luis notes that Miguel, at 11, wasn't the person who spoke out loudly, but that he "was the best among us." He's good-looking, good in school and athletics, and an obvious leader. Miguel is later killed.

## Gloria

Luis's younger sister. Luis notes that Gloria becomes involved in his gang but feels it is merely a phase. Gloria, called Shorty in the gang, looks up to Luis. When Luis is hurt by the actions of a girlfriend, Gloria offers to take revenge. When Luis is targeted by a rival gang for his role in a firebombing, Gloria is almost shot.

## Chente Rameriz

The man who serves as overseer of a community center that becomes a place of hope for Luis. It's Chente who gives Luis a book on murals and starts him painting them. It's also Chente who Luis calls on for advice when offered a plea bargain for charges of assaulting an officer. Chente tells him that Luis can stand on the principle of the issue, but that his advice is to take the deal so that Luis will be around to continue to fight for the changes that are right.

## Roberta

A girl Luis meets and likes. The two spend a lot of time together but Luis becomes concerned when he finds her gone several evenings. He eventually learns that Roberta is prostituting herself out to make money.

## **Daniel Fuentes**

The man who teaches boxing at the community center. Fuentes urges the youngsters on his team on and resents the interference of the team sponsor, a featherweight boxer who only wants the team to win at all costs.

## **Camila**

The girl Luis says he could fall for. He eventually does fall in love with her and marries her in 1974. He notes that they soon have a son together.



# **Objects/Places**

## **Cuidad Jaurez, Chihuahua**

Where Luis lives with his family until he is two years old.

## **Los Angeles, California**

Where Luis moves with his family and where his baby sister is born.

## **Watts**

The neighborhood where Luis lives as a child with his family.

## **Bloomington, Indiana**

Where Luis's father meets his mother.

## **109th Street School**

Where Luis begins his education. He notes that the first teacher was obvious in that she didn't want him in her class and the second didn't know what to do with him.

## **Taft High School**

Where Luis's father gets a job as a substitute teacher.

## **The Animal Tribe**

The gang Luis joins after The Tribe absorbs most of the smaller gangs in the neighborhood.

## **Mark Keppel High School**

Where Luis begins high school and where he returns to be part of a Chicano student organization.

## **ToHMAS**

A group Luis helps begins at Keppel High School. It's an acronym for To Help Mexican American Students.

## **The Glasshouse**

The name given to the Hall of Justice jail where Luis is held in a cell next to Charles Manson.

## **Resurrection Cemetery**

Where several members of the barrio are buried, having died of violence at an early age.

# Themes

## Coming of Age

Luis ages in physical years but also comes to age emotionally over the course of the story. As the book opens, he is a nine-year-old boy, facing the move back to Mexico with his mother upon the breakup of his parents. Luis says that he goes wherever he's told, and that it makes no difference. Over the coming years, he will lament his lack of control over anything, including his own life. The realization that he has control comes suddenly, when a walkout he's staged is canceled for an assembly. He admits that his walkout doesn't happen, but notes that the assembly happens because of his actions.

The other main point of age and maturity comes through encounters with other gang members. Early on, Luis says that he finds he has to follow his fellow gang members, and to back them regardless of their actions. This is evident as he participates in robberies, burglaries, beatings and the firebombing of a house. Then comes the day Luis refuses to take a hit of a cigarette laced with PCP. He notes that others also refuse, following his lead. He's heady with the knowledge that his action had an impact, but is immediately faced with expulsion from the gang. He comes to realize that there's nothing to keep him on the streets and that the only way to escape it is to leave, which he does.

## The Need to Belong

Luis notes that most of the earliest gangs were called clubs or cliques, and that they were born of necessity. He says that most young men needed to belong to some larger group for protection. That gang membership becomes vital for survival. Luis and several who live in an area that is physically located between two gang turfs are told that they have to choose a side. As it's stated, if they don't belong to one or the other, both will continue to hassle them.

This need to survive seems to be secondary to the willing following of any gang-related activity. Luis notes that during the time he lives in the garage, he's easily accessible. For that reason, he's often called on to participate in gang retaliation raids.

This sense of belonging remains and security remains only as long as the gang member follows the rules of gang conduct. The moment Luis objects to a raid against the Sangras, he's in trouble with the gang. While he wants to make the point that the gangs have a bigger battle to fight than each other, he isn't heard. In that case, though Luis felt he wanted to do what was right for his fellow gang members, they were unable to see that point and Luis becomes an outcast. It should be noted that this need to belong sometimes seems to stifle individuality.

## Discovery of Self-Worth

Luis says early on that he's like a ball, bouncing around but without any reason or direction. He also says it doesn't matter. It takes him some time to come to the conclusion that he does have control of specific aspects of his life. While a child in this situation could easily be waylaid by the poverty, lack of education and emotional instability of his family and neighborhood, Luis comes to realize that he has something to offer and that he can be a contributing member of society.

It's interesting to note that he holds jobs from an early age, including a paper route, mowing lawns and cleaning houses. However, he seems to come to believe in himself when someone else does so through a youth program, giving him a job that includes picking up trash. His talent as a painter and writer are soon also discovered, though Luis doesn't seem to expect that anyone will appreciate his worth on these fronts.

In the prologue to the book, Luis notes that his problems didn't magically disappear when he gained his distance from the gangs. He continues to fight drugs and alcohol and says that it's years before he wins that battle.

# Style

## Perspective

The book is written in first person from Luis's perspective. The point of view is greatly limited and may leave the reader wanting details that simply aren't included. For example, Luis points out that he's seeing a girl who claims to have been pregnant. The reader doesn't learn what happened to her because Luis doesn't know.

The majority of the book is written in past tense, but the author lapses occasionally into present tense. For example, in chapter three Luis talks about being in jail at the Temple City sheriff's office. In this brief scene, he describes the fact that officers openly say that they pick up any seventeen-year-old male in the neighborhood so that by the time they're in any real trouble, they have a record and will face tougher sentences. Luis says that the police are nothing more than a gang, that the gangs have given the police gang names such as Maddog and Big Red, and that the police often incite violence among the gangs. In this brief scene, Luis lapses into present tense. He says that the officer he's talking to is also Chicano, "but I know how much he hates everything I am." In chapter four, Luis describes a man name Jose Palmas who "strums at a six-string as fluid fingers move across its neck." Luis says later in that scene that Jose eventually stops showing up when he's supposed to and eventually plays only when high on heroine.

That tense change seems to occur when Luis explains something that isn't really part of the story line but is an important part of his life. For example, the story about Jose and the guitar comes after Luis describes meeting Vivian and just before a scene involving a fight at his high school.

## Tone

The book is written in an easy-to-read tone. There are words from Luis's native language, the Spanish spoken in the barrios. Many of these are self-explanatory or are included in the glossary at the end of the book. Some simply are not and it's left to the reader to either determine their meaning or skip them altogether. There are also curse words scattered throughout the text. These are not prevalent and are used chiefly in dialog where they reflect the speakers and situation.

The story is set in California in the 1960s and 1970s. The author's descriptions of both time and place are believable, but are also very vivid in many respects. He leaves no doubts as to place and time, describing his family's life, "In the mid-60s, South San Gabriel." He sometimes refers to changes. For example, he describes the South San Gabriel area of then, adding that development in the following years eradicates corn fields and the streets that resembled "goat trails." He notes that the area became a refuge for the unwanted people of California, but would later become a desirable place.



He doesn't say that the lives of the people who lived there changed, but does say that people other than the Mexicans with no place to go came to desire the land.

Luis describes events of the era. He says that he was in jail in the cell next to Charles Manson, though Luis was at the time still a juvenile. He also writes of the protests against the Vietnam war - protests that turned into riots.

## Structure

The book is divided into ten chapters and an epilogue. The chapters vary in length but are each more than twenty pages. An interesting point about the structure is that many of the chapters begin with a particular event and end by wrapping back up to that event. For example, Chapter Four begins with Luis being awakened in his garage bedroom by his sister who throws a shoe at him to wake him up. He notes that the night before he had planned to commit suicide and that his mother has kicked him out of the house but agreed to let him live in the garage. He then drops back in time to the events leading up to the consideration of suicide. The chapter ends with his sister arriving in his garage bedroom, waking him by throwing a shoe at him. This structure is repeated in other chapters. Some readers may find it distracting and difficult to follow. The method is not explained at all and it's left to the reader to keep track of the convoluted story line.

The book also contains a prologue in which Luis explains the changes that occurred after the first printing of the book, and an epilogue, also written by Luis. There is a glossary as well with many of the Spanish words included in the book.

## Quotes

"She was still young then in Watts, in her thirties, but she had all these ailments. She didn't even have teeth; they rotted away many years before. This made her look much older until later when she finally obtained false ones. Despite this she worked all the time, chased after my brother with a belt or a board, and held up the family when almost everything else came apart." Chapter One, Page 23

"But on those days the perils came out too - you could see it in the faces of the street warriors, in the play of children, too innocent to know what lurked about, but often the first to fall during a gang war or family scuffle." Chapter One, Page 29

"It seemed Mama was just there to pick up the pieces when my father's house of cards fell. She knew it would." Chapter One, Page 31

"I secretly admired Tia Chucha, the most creative influence of my childhood, while others talked holier-than-thou about her irreverence, her eccentricities, as if the craziness didn't threaten to thunder out of any of us at one time or another." Luis about his cousin, Chapter Three, Page 59

"Shit, I thought, they want to firebomb a house. This mean somebody's mother, little sister or brother could be hurt or killed. But this is how things had gotten by then. Everyone was fair game in barrio wars; people's families were being hit all the time." Chapter Five, Page 118

"And for a time, for a most productive and wonderful time, gang violence stood at a standstill. For a time it appeared the internal warfare had given way to the struggle for land, language and liberty- when we had something more important to fight for." - Luis on the Vietnam protests, Chapter Seven, Page 166

"These aren't criminals without faces. They are our children! What you propose only pits the community against itself - and the police would like nothing better than that." - Chente to the suggestion that gang members should be jailed, Chapter Eight, Page 194

"Many home girls become mothers, although they are unfinished children. Whatever comfort and warmth they lack at home is also withheld from their babies" Chapter Eight, Page 198

"Mr. Perez arranged field trips to downtown, the beach, even to Beverly Hills; he wanted us to see the world, see how others lived and know why we didn't live the same way. But teachers who helped students think were considered radical." Chapter Nine, Page 216

"I recalled the old people who came here, the men in brown suede hats and canes, and black-shawled women with rosaries clutched inside vein-streaked hands. I recalled the mothers who had to be restrained as they lay across the casket, beseeching to be buried with their son or daughter." Luis on Resurrection Cemetery, Chapter Ten, page 239

"Although PCP preceded the crack epidemic, it was enough to make blabbering idiots of once-vigorous boys and girls." Chapter Ten, Page 240

"Don't waste the rest of your days with this hate? What's revenge? What can you get by getting to me? I'm the least of your enemies. It's time to let it go, it's time to go on with your life." To Chava, Chapter Ten, Page 245

# Topics for Discussion

Describe Luis's relationship with his brother, Rano. Compare the lives of the two as youngsters.

What is it that Luis says first pulls him into a gang?

What is Luis's attitude about his own involvement in a gang? How does that attitude evolve over the years? What is his attitude when his younger sister, Gloria, becomes involved?

Describe Luis's near-death experience while sniffing. What is it about that experience that beckons him to try suicide? Why doesn't he?

Who is Viviana? Chente? Mr. Madison? Wilo? Payasa? Camila? Chava?

What is Luis's gang nickname? How does he get it? What does it say about his tendency toward violence and his ability to withstand it?

What event at Keppel High School prompts Luis to realize that he has power? Luis's life is changing at this time. List three points of that change and their impact on Luis.

What event prompts Luis to decide he has to leave the gang life behind?