

Column L.A. poet laureate Luis Rodriguez closing out his reign as he began: Always running



Luis Rodriguez, author of 15 books, is coming to the end of his two-year appointment by Mayor Eric Garcetti.

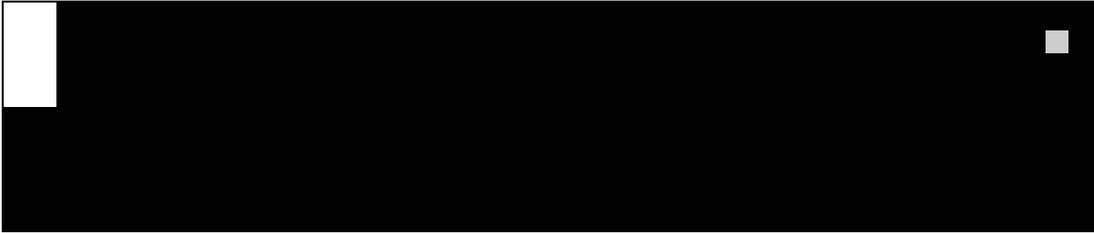
By **Steve Lopez**

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The poet laureate of Los Angeles had just taken a seat at a Pacoima cafe when he was approached by two young men.

“Excuse me, but are you Luis Rodriguez?” asked Jorge Ruiz, who was with his brother, Giovanni.

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A clerk had pointed out the author of “Always Running, La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.,” Rodriguez’s powerful story of how he descended into gang life and then rose out of it through a love of books. The 1993 memoir became an L.A. classic and launched a career, and the two youngsters were determined to meet the author.

“That was the first book I ever read,” said Ruiz, who was unabashedly star-struck. “I just had to say thank you.”

The Ruiz brothers, students at Los Angeles Valley College, said they read “Always Running” several years ago in middle school.

“Honestly, I always hated reading,” said Jorge, who changed his ways after devouring that book. “Wow, I was blinded for so long, what a shame.”

Rodriguez, author of 15 books, hears this sort of thing frequently from admirers. He thanked the Ruiz brothers and wished them luck, and a few minutes later it was time for him to go to work. The celebrated writer is still always running, his passion and prose an inspiration to hordes of local readers and writers, me included.

Rodriguez, 62, was chosen for the two-year appointment in October of 2014 by Mayor [Eric Garcetti](#). He is the city’s second poet laureate, a job that offers a tiny stipend in return for roughly 20 public events and a handful of other duties each year. Rodriguez wanted to go above and beyond.

“Last year I did 110,” he said. “I haven’t counted all of the events this year, but it’s more than that.”

Danielle Brazell, general manager of the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs, called Rodriguez a social justice poet and said that “in countless appearances, he inspired vibrant communities across L.A.”

Rodriguez has visited schools and prisons, and appeared at music festivals and museums, book fairs and student leadership conferences. He’s done all of this in addition to writing a book of poetry, assembling an anthology of work by local poets, traveling the country on a speaking tour and pitching in at Tia Chucha’s, the Pacoima bookstore and cultural center he and his family opened 15 years ago.

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In May, with just several months left in his term, Rodriguez was informed that 40 libraries had asked if he could squeeze them in before signing off. Would he consider working in at least a few of them?

Rodriguez didn’t like that idea.

“I told them I’d do all 40,” he said.

Rodriguez was down to the last half dozen when he visited Pacoima on a recent evening.

“I love being out there,” he said. “I love talking to kids.”

That is no doubt because he was lost as a kid, so much so that his parents kicked him out of the house.

“I didn’t blame them,” said Rodriguez, who was a drug addict and gang member.

Though he was seriously messed up, he had a thing for the written word. Language first stirred his soul at the age of 10, when he was hospitalized with a hernia and came upon a children’s book of Bible stories. Then it was “Charlotte’s Web” that reeled him in.

As a teen rebel, he stashed books in abandoned cars and little crevices along the L.A. River, because it wasn’t cool to be seen reading.

“When I was 15 years old I was homeless in the streets of downtown L.A., and the library was my refuge,” said Rodriguez. “Now here I am 40-some years later as poet laureate, and I get the beauty of that.”

Los Angeles, built on desire and dressed in chaos, seems the perfect place for a poet to sketch hope, heartbreak and imperfect beauty.

“To me,” Rodriguez said in his Pacoima talk, a poet laureate’s job “is not just to bring poetry to the community, but to draw it out of the community.”

Everyone has stories, he told an audience of 20, some of them students.

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— Luis Rodriguez

Anyone who wants to write should read the greats, Rodriguez said, just as he read Pablo Neruda. But don’t write like anyone else, he went on. Tell the story you feel compelled to tell, and do it in your own style.

And if you struggle?

“Put yourself in a forest,” he said, and imagine that in front of you is a road.

Ask yourself where it goes.

“Whatever comes to mind, write about it,” he said. “Because that’s you saying, ‘Where am I going in life?’... Be prepared to be scared, or to cry, or to get mad, but go with it and don’t stop, because it’s actually very therapeutic.”

In the audience, Jose Manuel Cruz said he came to hear Rodriguez and thank him for “Always Running,” which helped steer Cruz out of trouble.

Jaime Arias came because Rodriguez is always doing something new, and he wanted to hear about the chance of a movie based on “Always Running.”

Carmen Gonzalez came because she did some prison time and wants to tell stories now, and Rodriguez is an inspiration.

Vaughn Next Century Learning Center students Kayla Calvo, Diana Moran and Clarisa Pena came because it was an extra-credit offering from their teacher, but hearing Rodriguez made them want to read his books, forget the extra credit.

Omar Sanchez, 14, sat in the front row with a dog-eared copy of “Always Running.”

“I’ve read it about five times now,” Sanchez said when Rodriguez called on him. “I want to say it’s been a really big inspiration, just seeing you up there right now.... And I’d like to say, can you sign my book?”

Rodriguez read from “Borrowed Bones: New Poems from the Poet Laureate of Los Angeles.”

Appropriately enough, one entry is “Love Poem to Los Angeles.” And here’s how it begins:

“To say I love Los Angeles is to say

I love its shadows and nightlights,

its meandering streets,

the stretch of sunset-colored beaches.

It’s to say I love the squawking wild parrots,

the palm trees that fail to topple in robust winds,

that within a half hour of L.A.’s center

you can cavort in snow, deserts, mountains, beaches.”

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