

An **autobiography** is often considered to be more **subjective** than a biography. The writer is intimately involved with the subject—himself or herself—and the story is often told with more emotion than a biography. The reader is left with not only the facts of the writer’s life but also an impression of the writer’s character.

The following excerpt is from *Always Running*, Luis Rodriguez’s autobiography about growing up with gangs, poverty, and prejudice in Los Angeles. In the excerpt, Rodriguez talks about his relationship with Rano, the brother who was three years older than he. In the **Response Notes** column, write your impressions of Rano and of the brothers’ relationship.

from **Always Running** by Luis J. Rodriguez

Although we moved around the Watts area, the house on 105th Street near McKinley Avenue held my earliest memories, my earliest fears and questions. It was a small matchbox of a place. Next to it stood a tiny garage with holes through the walls and an unpainted barnlike quality. The weather battered it into a leaning shed. The backyard was a jungle. Vegetation appeared to grow down from the sky. There were banana trees, huge “sperm” weeds (named that because they stank like semen when you cut them), foxtails and yellowed grass. An avocado tree grew in the middle of the yard and its roots covered every bit of ground, tearing up cement walks while its branches scraped the bedroom windows. A sway of clothes on some lines filled the little bit of grassy area just behind the house.

My brother and I played often in our jungle, even pretending to be Tarzan (Rano mastered the Tarzan yell from the movies). The problem, however, was I usually ended up being the monkey who got thrown off the trees. In fact, I remember my brother as the most dangerous person alive. He seemed to be wracked with a scream which never let out. His face was dark with meanness, what my mother called *maldad*. He also took delight in seeing me writhe in pain, cry or cower, vulnerable to his own inflated sense of power. This hunger for cruelty included his ability to take my mom’s most wicked whippings—without crying or wincing. He’d just sit there and stare at a wall, forcing Mama to resort to other implements of pain—but Rano would not show any emotion.

Yet in the streets, neighborhood kids often chased Rano from play or jumped him. Many times he came home mangled, his face swollen. Once somebody threw a rock at him which cut a gash across his forehead, leaving a scar Rano has to this day.

Response
Notes

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Another time a neighbor's kid smashed a metal bucket over Rano's head, slicing the skin over his skull and creating a horrifying scene with blood everywhere. My mother in her broken English could remedy few of the injustices, but she tried. When this one happened, she ran next door to confront that kid's mother. The woman had been sitting on her porch and saw everything.

"Qué pasó aquí?" Mama asked.

"I don't know what you want," the woman said. "All I know is your boy picked up that bucket and hit himself over the head—that's all I know."

In school, they placed Rano in classes with retarded children because he didn't speak much English. They even held him back a year in the second grade.

For all this, Rano took his rage out on me. I recall hiding from him when he came around looking for a playmate. My mother actually forced me out of closets with a belt in her hand and made me play with him.

One day we were playing on the rooftop of our house.

"Grillo, come over here," he said from the roof's edge. "Man, look at this on the ground."

I should have known better, but I leaned over to see. Rano then pushed me and I struck the ground on my back with a loud thump and lost my breath, laying deathly still in suffocating agony, until I slowly gained it back.

Another time he made me the Indian to his cowboy, tossed a rope around my neck and pulled me around the yard. He stopped barely before it choked the life out of me. I had rope burns around my neck for a week. ❖



- ❖ Rodriguez says that Rano had a "hunger for cruelty." Circle specific words or phrases that show Rano's cruelty. Notice how the author reinforces his portrayal through repeated incidents and details.
- ❖ What are your impressions of Luis and Rano? How do you think the incidents in this excerpt would change if they were included in Rano's autobiography? Write a few sentences from Rano's autobiography, telling about the same incidents that Luis related.

In what ways does changing the storyteller change the impression that the reader gets?