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The Graphic Truth

“The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame.”

– Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891

In 2010 the Menifee California Union School District pulled a book from its libraries after a student came across the definition of “oral sex” — according to the American Library Association, this book was the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* (Doyle 6). In other schools Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* was banned because of objections to its use of derogatory language that is not only historically reflective of the period in which it is set but also a large part of the truth of this literary beacon for Civil Rights awareness (Doyle 6). Another such book is *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, a factual account written by thirteen year old Anne Frank and “one of the most enduring symbols of the atrocities of the Nazi regime” (Doyle 5). This critical work was removed, not because it bears witness to the horrors of life in Nazi Germany, but due to supposed sexual and homosexual themes (Doyle 5). With texts such as these being stripped from school libraries across the country, America’s youth are being deprived of the education these historically rich works have to offer. Contemporary books worthy of study are suffering the same fate: Luis Rodriguez’s 1993 memoir *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* is one such book. While some believe Rodriguez’s description of the truth about gang violence, drugs, and sex is too explicit to be taught in high schools, the

memoir provides a real-life account of both immediate and long-term effects that makes it not only suitable, but absolutely essential for the high school classroom.

Though graphic, the violent passages of *Always Running* offer important insights into the severe psychological consequences of gang life. Perhaps the most significant of these passages is the depiction of violence committed by Rodriguez himself. As part of his initiation into the Las Lomas gang, Rodriguez helps to commit murder, recounting “I clasped the screwdriver and walked up to the beaten driver in the seat whose head was bleeding.... *Do it!* were the last words I recalled before I plunged the screwdriver into flesh and bone, and the sky screamed” (111). Pro-banners object to this excerpt on the grounds that Rodriguez suffers no apparent repercussions for committing murder. They fear that a lack of consequences might encourage young readers to believe that violent and unlawful behavior is acceptable. However, the notion that Rodriguez goes unpunished could not be more mistaken. Through he is not penalized by the justice system, he struggles with intense inner turmoil that punishes him more harshly than a jail sentence ever could. As the memoir progresses, Rodriguez becomes increasingly hesitant to participate in gang violence; he explains that “[he] didn’t want to do it, but [he] couldn’t stop. [Rodriguez] felt trapped. [He] knew the only thing for [him] was to go through with it, and get out of there as fast as possible. [He] felt excitement. And an ache of grief” (119). This internal battle is worse than any official punishment. Rodriguez’s decision to join a gang renders him unable to shirk his commitment to it and as a consequence he cannot mentally, emotionally or physically escape from the horrors of the things he has seen and the immoral acts he has committed.

It seems contradictory to join a gang yet feel uneasy about the violence it condones, but the reasons behind joining run much deeper than a simple desire for violence. Gangs offer what

society often cannot: a sense of security and stability for the youth that crave belonging and acceptance in a world they feel has abandoned them. The violence that ensues from this is only a testament to their commitment to these makeshift families. According to Olga Khazan and Neon Tommy of the Huffington Post, in their article “Crenshaw High Kids Struggle and Succeed, Despite Post-Traumatic Stress,” “psychologists have found that children growing up in turbulent environments are often afflicted with the [symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]. [It] can cause students to... lose interest in schoolwork, have difficulty concentrating and lash out aggressively at authority figures” (6). In rough, poverty-stricken environments (such as the areas in Los Angeles where Rodriguez grew up) joining a gang is often a way of gaining stability. As Rodriguez states, “[gangs are] our children, who desire the same as any young person. Respect. A sense of belonging. Protection. The same thing that the YMCA, Little League or the Boy Scouts want. It wasn’t any more than I wanted as a child” (250). Unfortunately for Rodriguez, stability comes at the cost of joining a gang and then having to deal with the psychological consequences of committing the immoral act of murder. Far too many people don’t look past the violence at the real problem, which is precisely why Rodriguez’s memoir is essential in the classroom. As Rodriguez says about his intentions for *Always Running*:

I have a duty to take those lessons and experiences to as many people as will listen, to expand the conversation about why people join gangs, are violent, lose their imaginations and their hopes, and what we can do as creative and caring communities to truly see and address these ongoing and deepening concerns. Censorship, repression and suppression simply don’t work. (xv)

Introducing *Always Running* in the high school classroom will spread awareness of the desperation that drives children to join gangs, and provide knowledge about the resources

available for these children to feel supported, respected and cared for. This is a crucial opportunity for “creative and caring communities” to truly help students understand alternatives available to them and to create strong, lasting support systems without the need for violence.

Rodriguez’s descriptions of drug use are also met with objection since pro-banners feel such excerpts glorify the act instead of showing consequences. In an explicit account of his own drug use, Rodriguez details how “spray was dangerous; it literally ate your brain. But it was also a great escape.... Sounds became louder, clearer — pulsating. Bodies removed themselves from bodies, floating with the sun.... With spray [he] became water” (102-103). While Rodriguez does mention the dangers of using spray, pro-banners could still argue that he glorifies the effects of the drug, emphasizing the pleasurable experience and not the dangers of a potentially fatal habit. However, Rodriguez bluntly identifies the deadly consequences when he reveals that, among other reasons, using an assortment of drugs, including pills, liquor, and aerosol spray leads him to attempt suicide (81). This passage, also graphic, shows a harsh consequence of drug use. Even more repercussions are portrayed when Rodriguez describes the fate of his friend Payasa. After repeated heavy drug use, she also tries to commit suicide and is sent to a rehabilitation facility for adolescents (105-106). Although Rodriguez describes the immediate, often pleasurable, effects of drugs, he also shows their brutal long-term consequences. Addressing both aspects of drug use is essential. To only stress the consequences of drug use without equal emphasis on the immediate effects of drugs is dishonest, and could negatively shift adolescents’ curiosity towards the forbidden sensations of drugs. This is why it is absolutely essential for books such as *Always Running* that contain vivid passages about the nature of drugs to be taught in schools. Learning these truths in an academic institution gives students

opportunities to ask questions and receive information in a safe environment, rather than stumbling upon it in the world without the tools to make educated decisions.

Perhaps the pro-banners' strongest objection is to the sexual passages in *Always Running*, which could seem unnecessarily descriptive. Rodriguez details his sexual experience with a prostitute, telling readers that "the penis sank into the bristle of pubis, then slid into the oiled vagina, covering it in flesh and juice and rhythm of pelvis.... The scent from her hair and neck filled my head as I moved and quivered inside of her" (128). Pro-banners might argue that this particular passage is unnecessarily detailed and inappropriate since it includes no mention of birth control or the inherent consequences of unprotected sex. This passage could suggest that sex is something to be taken lightly. However, Rodriguez shows the negative effects later when he clearly identifies the harsh reality of early and unprotected sex. He explains that "many home girls become mothers, although they are unfinished children" and also reveals that he may have accidentally fathered a child he will never know (198-99). The sexual passages in *Always Running* are important because they present a crucial teaching opportunity. In an educational setting, adults can discuss the blunt truth about sex with adolescents, providing them with resources, rather than ignoring the issue and allowing them to learn through experience. While some may be uncomfortable with the idea of children learning about sex, keeping children in the dark about this topic can incur deeper harm. According to "Teen Pregnancy Overview, Consequences of Teenage Pregnancy," reviewed by M.D. Stanley J. Swierzewski, "approximately one million teenage girls become pregnant each year in the United States.... To lower teen pregnancy rates, older children must be educated about sex and about the consequences of pregnancy" (1). *Always Running* provides the opportunity to do just that while using a compelling work of literature to discuss real life events, which is why this memoir is so

important to an adolescent's education.

Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* is graphic and should by no means be taken lightly. The gang violence, drugs, and sex are an explicit but essential part of this literary work and help young readers to understand key issues in society today. Because of this, banning *Always Running* robs youth of a crucial part of their education. As Rodriguez stresses, "there is too much censorship of reality in the classroom. Whatever involves social discomfort, emotional depth or hard thinking is cut out... Our humanity is sacrificed, little by little" (xiv). Too many youth aren't taught the hard truths about violence, drugs, and sex. This leaves them defenseless, rendering them susceptible to bad decisions that could ruin their lives, depriving them of education about available alternatives and even of the knowledge needed later in life: when their own children need advice or their communities need resources. As Oscar Wilde cautioned, books unnecessarily censored as immoral are often the very books that can lead readers to a better world. America needs to stop abandoning its children and face the truth.

Works Cited

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