



To Alcatraz, Death Row, and Back: Memories of an East LA Outlaw

Ernie López

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When Ernie López was a boy selling newspapers in Depression-era Los Angeles, his father beat him when he failed to bring home the expected eighty to ninety cents a day. When the beatings became unbearable, he took to petty stealing to make up the difference. As his thefts succeeded, Ernie's sense of necessity got tangled up with ambition and adventure. At thirteen, a joyride in a stolen car led to a sentence in California's harshest juvenile reformatory. The system's failure to show any mercy soon propelled López into a cycle of crime and incarceration that resulted in his spending decades in some of America's most notorious prisons, including four and a half years on death row for a murder López insists he did not commit.

To Alcatraz, Death Row, and Back is the personal life story of a man who refused to be broken by either an abusive father or an equally abusive criminal justice system. While López freely admits that "I've been no angel," his insider's account of daily life in Alcatraz and San Quentin graphically reveals the violence, arbitrary infliction of excessive punishment, and unending monotony that give rise to gang cultures within the prisons and practically insure that parolees will commit far worse crimes when they return to the streets. Rafael Pérez-Torres discusses how Ernie López's experiences typify the harsher treatment that ethnic and minority suspects often receive in the American criminal justice system, as well as how they reveal the indomitable resilience of Chicanos/as and their culture. As Pérez-Torres concludes, "López's story presents us with the voice of one who—though subjected to a system meant to destroy his soul—not only endured but survived, and in surviving prevailed."

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