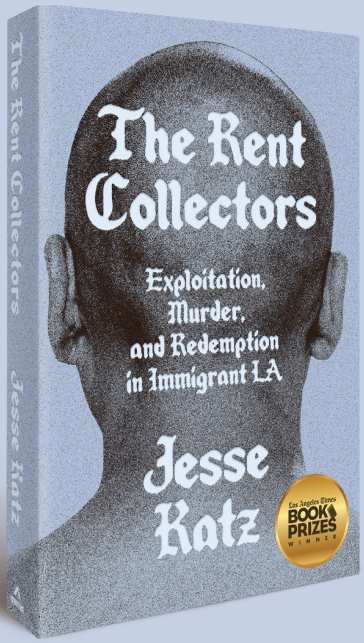

The Rent Collectors

Exploitation, Murder, and Redemption in Immigrant LA

Jesse Katz

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"Katz has constructed a riveting and masterful urban narrative." ***—Los Angeles Times***

"In Macedo, Katz found the story of a lifetime . . . For a tough-guy book about tough guys, this is a work of almost unerring tenderness." **—Ben Ehrenreich, *The New York Times Book Review***

ASTRA HOUSE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The Rent Collectors* considers the ways that Los Angeles's criminalization of street vendors is exploited by an extralegal system of taxation and enforcement administered by a highly structured local gang. How can legislation protect street vendors? Do you think the measures eventually adopted by the city council were sufficient to disempower the Columbia Lil Cycos?

2. The U.S. immigration laws play a central role in *The Rent Collectors*. In what ways do gangs take advantage of a system that creates barriers to full-fledged civic participation for millions of people seeking a better life?

3. What is the role of hyper-masculinity and machismo in *The Rent Collectors*? How do gendered notions of power and responsibility precipitate much of the violence described in the book?

4. How does RICO—the federal racketeering statute originally designed to combat mafia-related crime—both inhibit and dispense legitimate forms of justice and accountability? Do you think that RICO was successfully used in the cases against the Columbia Lil Cycos? What other tools could be applied?

5. Many characters in *The Rent Collectors* seek redemption in one form or another. How is redemption represented in the book and to what extent is it achieved?

6. Consider the possibility that Giovanni had fulfilled his assignment, killing the vendor without harming the baby. In that event, how likely is it that the crime would have been solved? What might have become of Giovanni?

7. How does your perception of Giovanni change over the course of the book? How does his story engage with and challenge straightforward notions of morality?

FURTHR READING

***Our Migrant Souls: A Meditation on Race and the Meaning and Myths of "Latino"* by Héctor Tobar (2023).**

A former *Los Angeles Times* comrade who's been a friend and mentor for decades, Héctor published this book as I was finishing my own, and I couldn't get enough of the defiant optimism he unpacks. *Our Migrant Souls* reminds us of all the ways people who have left everything familiar behind manage to preserve their humanity, even find joy, in a world that willfully devalues them.

***A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* by Rebecca Solnit (2009).**

There's nothing obvious that connects *The Rent Collectors* to this astonishingly smart, counterintuitive account of the courage and purpose that calamity can stir. Solnit is writing about earthquakes and hurricanes and the like, and the almost euphoric reordering of society they leave in their wake. But I kept thinking of Giovanni and the perverse circumstances in which disaster liberated him, freeing him from the everyday disaster that was his life before.

***Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* by Gregory Boyle (2010).**

When I became the gang reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* in the early 1990s, one of the first people I sought out was Father Greg. He hadn't yet written this book or founded Homeboy Industries, the largest gang rehabilitation and reentry program in the world, but he'd landed on a message: we belong to each other. Not long after making contact with Giovanni, I sent him *Tattoos on the Heart*. And in moments of uncertainty, I've returned to its pages many times since.

***Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA* by Luis J. Rodriguez (1993).**

Rumored to be one of the most stolen books in the LA public library system, *Always Running* is the seminal Chicano gang memoir: dark and violent at its depths, exuberant and restorative as despair gives way to "victories in language." During the years I volunteered as a writing teacher in the juvenile halls, I shared passages from this book to convince my students that they, too, had expressive powers to unlock.

***Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America* by Jill Leovy (2015).**

A common refrain lobbed at those of us who write about crime is that we distort perceptions of the communities most impacted. Leovy laments the opposite: that we pay too little attention. In 2007, she launched a blog, "The Homicide Report," that set out to document every murder in LA; baby Luis Angel was among the victims she noted that year. In *Ghettoside*, she extends her contrarian argument to policing—theorizing that an otherwise punitive system too often fails to prioritize the basic work of catching killers.

FURTHR READING

***Poverty, by America* by Matthew Desmond (2023).**

Social scientist, urban ethnographer, writer of one landmark book after another, Desmond explores the structural inequities that keep poor people poor. *Poverty, by America* makes the case that those who most need breaks from the government are the least likely to receive them, and that for marginalized communities, like the immigrant population of MacArthur Park, life is less about choices than an exhausting series of emergencies.

***Southland* by Nina Revoyr (2003).**

The lone novel on this list, *Southland* excavates an unsolved crime buried under layers of racism, police brutality, and family secrets. I love how Revoyr captures the textures of an overlooked Los Angeles, faithfully recreating the intersection of the African American and Japanese American communities against the backdrop of World War II and the Watts uprising. It's a murder mystery but also a testament to the city's underappreciated histories.

***Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling* by Jason De León (2024).**

I can't think of a recent book that I have admired (or envied) more than *Soldiers and Kings*, a tour de force of what De León, an anthropologist, calls "deep hanging out." Insinuating himself into the desultory lives of low-level guías, he emerges with nuanced, nonjudgmental portraits of the people who both exploit and protect Central American migrants on their journeys north. Human smuggling doesn't exist in a vacuum; it's the increasingly militarized US border that keeps the characters in this book employed.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

One of the many sorry facts of incarceration is that most prisons and jails don't allow inmates to possess hardcover books. Because they're heavier, with sturdier edges, hardcovers can theoretically be wielded as weapons. Or raised as shields. The fibers can also be wetted and molded—reconstituted into shivs and shanks. For better or worse, you can't cage imagination.

The publication of this paperback at last makes *The Rent Collectors* available to incarcerated readers, including the person with the greatest stake in the story, Giovanni Macedo. California's no-hardcover policy barred Giovanni from receiving a copy of the book when it first came out, and then for the next year. He couldn't feel its heft or admire its design or flip its pages or inhale its new-book perfume. The best workaround I could devise was to open a draft on my computer, reduce the font to a size suitable only for the young, and hit print. It wouldn't be pretty, but I could mail Giovanni a Word document. Prison, of course, makes everything complicated: another rule forbids inmates from receiving more than ten sheets of paper at a time. So instead of sending a coherent manuscript, I had to group the pages into separate envelopes. Some were rejected and had to be sent again. In all, I went through nearly eighty stamps.

My letters trickled into Giovanni's cell across several weeks last summer, an unwieldy, serialized account that required him to arrange the installments in sequence and, whenever the mail hit a glitch, read some sections out of order. I can only imagine the strangeness of that experience, of trying to digest in piecemeal fashion the story of the life he'd once lived and was now working to repair while a complete version was out for public consumption. Not once had Giovanni asked me to omit or fudge a detail. He never requested a preview. Whatever lurked in those heaps of paper, he'd be taking it in for the first time. As Giovanni worked through his copy, he proved adept at separating his ego from the mishaps of the character on the page. "I get it, bro," he told me. "Fucked-up stories can be pretty entertaining." He did allow that he'd struggled with the chapters that brought him face to face with Francisco and Luis Angel, people he hadn't known in 2007 and who, all these years later, he was only now learning about. But he understood the necessity of it. If he was going to find his way home, he'd have to picture them, grieve for them, revive them in his mind as real, flesh-and-blood humans. The parole board would surely be asking if he fathomed what he'd taken.

While working on this book, I'd thought it would end with Giovanni's parole hearing, the official pronouncement on how far he'd come or still had to go. When Giovanni voluntarily postponed it for two years, I initially feared that the tale had come up short; there'd be no resolution. But the more I reflected on his decision, the more I appreciated what it said about him, about his courage and integrity. Giovanni could have waited for the state to pass judgment. Instead, he rendered his own verdict.

I knew that as Giovanni's new date approached, in 2025, he'd be anxious to make his case. He was still taking college courses, this time in statistics and cinema. He'd moved from the bakery into a more challenging job installing cable TV connections. He'd started a correspondence course with a counseling service that helps inmates unpack the meaning of accountability and

remorse, and while never super religious, he'd found comfort in Sunday chapel services and, without quite planning to, allowed a minister to dunk him in baptismal waters. In short, Giovanni was doing the work.

So I was taken aback when he broke the news to me, in late 2024, that he'd be deferring his hearing yet again. His lawyer—the same one who'd advised Giovanni to waive his previous appearance—had recommended he put it off after she learned of another write-up on his record. It was the sort of incident that can make prison seem booby-trapped, a mindless encounter turned explosive.

As Giovanni tells it, he'd just finished a phone call in his unit's day room (on a mounted Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation landline), and as he stepped back from the wall, he bumped into another inmate. Giovanni apologized; he hadn't seen anyone behind him. The other guy, a good twenty years older, took offense. "My bad," Giovanni repeated. In a different environment that would have been the end of it, but prison magnifies every slight and lapse, and the older guy sensed opportunity in Giovanni's acceptance of fault. He started jawing at Giovanni, baiting him in front of anyone within earshot: Pussy. You fuckin' pussy. Fuck you, pussy. A routine Monday afternoon had devolved into a test, one with no good answers.

If Giovanni declined to respond—or, worse, asked a guard to intervene—what then? He'd only confirm the taunts. Weakness would beget more abuse, maybe invite danger. An audience had formed, waiting to see how much Giovanni would take. The barrage of pussies continued. Giovanni finally ended it with a fist to his antagonist's nose. Nobody in authority would care about the circumstances of that one punch: Giovanni was guilty of "fighting." He agreed with his attorney to defer his parole hearing for another year. Let time pass, leave the matter safely behind him.

I found the whole situation agonizing. A year was nothing, but it could be everything. I thought about what the last year had meant to me, what I hoped to accomplish in the year ahead. To see Giovanni on the cusp of a new life only for him to stumble into a tough-guy squabble that torpedoed his plans and left him waiting again for a more realistic shot—it made progress seem so provisional. Time behind those walls accelerated and slowed in a heartbeat, flattening the calendar. Giovanni reassured me he was at peace with his choice. It didn't erase all the things he'd been doing right.

As Giovanni awaits a better opportunity to seek a reprieve, the world out here lurches toward a less merciful future. On November 5, 2024, Los Angeles voters ousted the reformist district attorney, George Gascón, in favor of a more conventional crimefighter. The new DA, a former assistant US attorney named Nathan Hochman, campaigned against Gascón's refusal to send deputy district attorneys to parole hearings—a "pro-criminal" policy, Hochman called it—and pledged to resume the practice of protesting the early release of violent offenders. When Giovanni does finally tell his story to the parole board, that means a prosecutor will now be there

to scrutinize his version of events and likely push for his continued incarceration. It's hard to imagine whose interests that would serve; Giovanni has done everything the government ever asked of him.

The same election also delivered the country a second Trump administration and, with it, new efforts to intimidate, malign, and ultimately expel as much of America's undocumented population as possible. The prospect of deportation squads targeting centers of immigrant life across the U.S., or of birthright citizenship being read out of the Fourteenth Amendment, now looms over millions of families and countless industries dependent on foreign-born labor. Even if logistical realities and legal barriers end up stymying Trump's most illiberal plans, we're in for years of suspicion and vilification.

At this very moment, wind-whipped firestorms are turning Pacific Palisades and Altadena to ash, a once-in-a-generation catastrophe that promises to challenge LA's perception of itself and redefine the city's priorities. Despite a rush in some quarters to score political points, most Angelenos are witnessing our collective strength: communities of all backgrounds banding together, rising to the occasion. Taco trucks have rolled out to evacuation sites to feed first responders. Day laborers, many ineligible to receive FEMA benefits, have volunteered to clear streets of debris. A thousand incarcerated firefighters have helped battle the flames, their crimes less important than their willingness to prove themselves capable and protect the city we treasure. And if LA has any hope of rebuilding, or readying itself to host an Olympics, there is no path forward without the skill and fortitude of an immigrant workforce.

Disaster consistently reveals the best in us. Nobody welcomes it. But if we pay attention to this one, it will teach us a lesson we need more than ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JESSE KATZ is a former *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles* magazine writer whose honors include the James Beard Foundation's M. F. K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award, PEN Center USA's Literary Journalism Award, a *National Magazine* Award nomination, and two shared Pulitzer Prizes. His writing has appeared in the anthologies *Best American Magazine Writing*, *Best American Crime Writing*, and *Best American Sports Writing*. As a volunteer with InsideOUT Writers, he has mentored incarcerated teenagers at Central Juvenile Hall and the former California Youth Authority. His first book, *The Opposite Field*, was set in LA's immigrant suburbs.