



Los Sharkies of Twelfth Street, when their cool relations with boys from nearby neighborhoods began to turn violent.

Few outside California remember the 1970s battles between Chicanos and police, or the warfare among gangs in the barrios of East LA. Armijo plunged into those fights when he was still a child. In his story, the police are minor characters—the real enemies were gangs of teenagers a few blocks away.

*The homeboys, he says, gave me a sense of self-importance and showed me how to earn respect. That was enough reason for me to embrace influences such as violence and intimidation that, for better or worse, were beginning to shape my life.*

It's easy to see that Armijo never was cut out to live that violent life. He speaks of wondering occasionally what to do next, but only when he found himself in a fight with one of his own gang did he finally make a choice. At seventeen he enlisted in the Army, where he found drugs even easier to get than they had been back home. When he overstayed a leave by twenty-nine days, he went back to find himself in a "retraining brigade." After that he apparently learned to stay out of trouble in the Army, but when his enlistment ended he went home.

Things had changed. Many of his homeboys had landed in jail for dealing drugs, and others were deeply involved in the trade. Armijo got a job, and married, only to find that though the neighborhood battles had eased violence remained the norm. Having been involved in another near-killing, he grabbed a chance for a job in Denver. But he missed the lifestyle, so he found a gang in his new neighborhood to hang out with. His wife wanted him to stay home, but he continued to roam the streets. She left, and then he moved back to East L.A.

Finally, he killed the wrong gang leader, got arrested, and went to prison for ten years. There he turned to God, but at the end of the story I wondered how long God would be able to keep Armijo in line.

Could one of those organizations dedicated to ending youth violence have changed things? Something turned Armijo into a killer; what was it? Surely there were ways out of the gang culture; surely some boys never got involved. Yet this book leaves me thinking of fate. Perhaps some people are destined to live disastrous lives.

This story is fascinating, but after a while I found myself losing touch—one battle after another can get old. Fred Stawitz, who co-wrote this book, as he has others, writes well, but the constant use of Chicano slang, as many as twenty such words on a page, became irritating; the glossary helps, but needing to refer to it far too often is a pain.

