



## Thirteen Senses

By Victor Villasenor  
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### Introduction

One of the most profound moments of insight in *Thirteen Senses* - a family memoir filled with many such moments - concerns the attempted suicide of an Anglo farmer who has lost his crop and with it all of his savings. Salvador Villasenor can't believe that a man would kill himself just because he has lost everything. "Most of us live our whole life with having nothing!" observes Salvador. But his brother-in-law, Victoriano, explains: "Among the gringos, most of their lives they've always had something, so nothing is something that they know nothing about."

It is the end of the 1920s and Southern California is rapidly growing into a major agricultural and multicultural center. Among the many hardworking immigrants that have settled in the area are the newly married Salvador and Lupe and their families. The young couple is basking in the intoxicating happiness of young love, but they have many truths yet to discover: about marriage, commitment, responsibility, and about each other. Both husband and wife come from a legacy of heroic suffering, having escaped Mexico during the revolution, and both have endured the privation, racism, and hard luck that most immigrants encounter in their adopted homeland. But Salvador and Lupe share another

legacy as well - the incredible strength and wisdom of their mothers, Margarita and Guadalupe. Margarita, especially, seems to possess the kind of enormous power that comes from having stared death in the eye, from having survived so much disaster that every day becomes a blessing. It is she who guides her son and "daughter-in-love" through the treacherous waters of marriage, helping them to understand that together they are stronger than they are apart, and teaching them how to tap the inner resources of their souls so they may see beyond the here and now.

With humor and compassion Victor Villasenor, author of the bestselling *Rain of Gold*, follows his young parents as they make their way in a precarious world. Salvador's bootlegging career allows him the luxury of ready cash, but it is also a dangerous way of life, one that could land him in jail at any moment. There are relatives to deal with, from Domingo, Salvador's hotheaded brother, to Carlota, Lupe's somewhat obnoxious sister. And there is the Depression, which threatens the countryside with widespread poverty and crime and ultimately forces Salvador and Lupe to leave their families to flee for Mexico.

Throughout this life, money comes and goes, but the love for one's family and God never wavers. Whether they are stranded in the Arizona desert with little water and a broken-down truck or feasting on freshly killed goat at an impromptu family barbecue; whether they are screaming at each other with bloodthirsty wrath, or blissfully wrapped in each other's arms, Salvador and Lupe never question the value and richness of life. As Lupe explains, some people don't know "how to be poor of purse, but rich of heart. . . All families see hard times. That's just part of la vida."

In a world where materialism and ambition can leave us feeling isolated, it is easy to spout platitudes about the power of love and the importance of family. But Lupe and Salvador's life together is a living testament to these truths. Their story is one of passion, heartache, hard work, disappointment, elation, anger, injustice, and forgiveness. It is a story that adds much to the greater story that is America's.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Villasenor opens the book as Lupe and Salvador's families gather to celebrate the couple's second wedding, 50 years after they first exchanged rings. How does this raucous, emotional ceremony set the stage for the story that follows? How do the wedding and the participants' behavior compare with your own family celebrations?
2. "Always remember that men are mineral," Lupe's mother advises her. "Women are vegetation. That's why the two will always have difficulties." Throughout the book, Villasenor raises the issue of differences between the sexes. Do you agree with this theory? Are men and women's inherent differences so contradictory that, "it's a miracle that they ever come together at all"?
3. Lupe and Salvador have enormous regard for their own - and each other's - mothers. Margarita, especially, emerges as a powerful, mystical figure capable of miracles and possessing profound wisdom. How did you react to Villasenor's portrayal of his grandmother? How does Lupe's own maternal power compare to that of her "mother-in-love"?
4. Margarita's religious practices are a fascinating combination of Roman Catholicism, mestizo beliefs, mysticism, and "New Age" philosophy. How does her spirituality compare with your own? Do you believe it is possible to adhere to pieces of a religion, without embracing the entire belief system?
5. What do you think of Margarita's conversations with God, Mary, Jesus, and the Devil? Does her easy relationship with them strike you as heretical?
6. What do you think about the book's mystical aspects? Do you believe that Margarita actually prevented Salvador from disaster and death - or was it luck? Was Domingo really visited by ten-thousand angels while in prison? Is it true, as Salvador claims, that "there is no way a person can talk in English about miracles and angels without sounding, well, kind of phony or holier than thou"? Do you need to have a basic understanding of Mexican/Indian culture to appreciate the miracles in this book?
7. What, if anything, did you learn about America's Great Depression, and its impact on Mexican immigrants, from reading this memoir? Do you think the impact of the Depression was less severe for immigrants because they were accustomed to poverty? Or was it harder, because they had given up so much to come to America, only to see their Promised Land crumble?
8. Villasenor makes a number of wonderfully astute observations about the differences between Latino and Anglo cultures. For instance, Salvador can not imagine questioning the authority of the church or its priests even if what Lupe's German obstetrician claims is true: "Listen to the priests about those matters that have to do with God, but not about women and children. What can a priest possibly know? The poor men live a very limited life." Likewise, Margarita comments that American doctors "only knew how to heal the body like a mechanic fixing a car." In what other ways do Lupe, Salvador and their families find American ways shocking? Do you think these cultural differences exist today?
9. At the beginning of this memoir, Villasenor asks this question about his parents' relationship: "Was it love? Had it ever really been love?" What do you think? How might Lupe and Salvador's conceptions of love have changed over the course of their marriage?
10. It's easy to forget that Villasenor's book is a memoir, and not a novel. Why is this? How does knowing that the characters and events are real alter the way you feel about certain aspects of the story, such as Salvador's bootlegging and Archie's corruption? Is it easier to feel sympathy for fictional characters because their actions are not real?
11. Do you think Salvador was a good man? How would you have responded to your own daughter marrying such a person? Do you think Lupe should have left her husband after she found out the truth about how he earned a living?
12. How does your family history compare with this story of the Villasenor family? What do family legends contribute to our sense of ourselves?

13. Villaseñor doesn't list the *Thirteen Senses* until the end of the book because, he writes, if he had, "people wouldn't have experienced the book." As you review the story of Lupe and Salvador's married life, can you identify the *Thirteen Senses*? How would your experience of the book been different if Villaseñor declined to list them at all?

**About the Author:**

Victor Villaseñor was born in the barrio of Carlsbad, California, 1940, then raised on his parents' ranch next door in Oceanside. His early education was marked with the combined frustrations of a language barrier, racial discrimination and his own profound dyslexia, and he dropped out of high school in his junior year. Urged by a relative, Victor's parents sent him to Mexico at the age of 19. While there, he discovered a wealth of Mexican art, literature and music that helped him recapture and understand the dignity and richness of his heritage. Excited by his Mexican experiences, Victor wanted to stay in Mexico and never return to the United States. But his parents convinced him that he must "not run away but return and make something" of himself.

Returning to the U.S. a year later, Victor experienced the old frustration and rage. He describes himself as "a bombshell, ready to explode" as he witnessed again the disregard toward poor and uneducated people and especially toward the Mexicans. Although never an avid reader, he struggled to teach himself to read. A chance encounter with Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* changed Victor's life, awakening a desire to use literature to confront the problems associated with his cultural heritage.

Over the next decade, Villaseñor wrote nine novels and 65 short stories, supporting himself by doing seasonal labor. After more than 265 rejections, his first novel, *Macho!*, was published in 1973. Villaseñor went on to write a nonfiction book, *Jury: The People Versus Juan Corona*, followed by his first screenplay, the critically acclaimed *Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, the production of which was financed by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

After 12 years of detailed research, Villaseñor completed *Rain of Gold*, the story of his mother and father, which takes readers from war-torn Mexico during the Revolution to the present day. The novel's prelude, *Wild Steps of Heaven* was published in 1996. He is also the author of *Walking Stars*, the first of a series of books for young people.

Villaseñor continues to share his message of world peace through his non-profit organization Snow Goose Global Thanksgiving. He is also in great demand as a public speaker, bringing a fresh perspective to a number of universal themes, including pride in heritage and family, the power of the written word, and dedication to education and personal achievement.

Victor Villaseñor continues to live on the ranch where he was raised in Oceanside, CA.