

Book Leads Teens to Find Own Stories

Steve Lopez

June 2, 2004, Los Angeles Times

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Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus



Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional

Journalists Award for national magazines.

He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" did not do it for the students of Fairfax High School. Too much slow-moving dust.

Toni Morrison's "Beloved" won no prizes either. Who could get through it?

Then came "Rain of Gold" by Victor Villaseñor, a book once referred to as "Roots" for Latinos. Teachers saw students reading it at the bus stop and during breaks, and when they weren't reading it they were talking about it.

With video games, TV, chat rooms, movies, music, cars, cellphones, short attention spans, girlfriends and boyfriends, what does it take to get a high school student to open a book, read the first sentence - and the next, and the next - without threats from teachers or parents, until, 562 pages later, the book has been devoured, The End?

The characters were like members of your own family, explained Fairfax junior Ana Tabares.

"It was impossible to stop reading," says Michelle Gomez, another junior at the Los Angeles campus. You live in two worlds as the first-generation child of immigrants, she said, and "Rain of Gold" made her more comfortable in both those worlds.

Villaseñor's mystical, folk-driven narrative of his life, published 13 years ago, takes on the two questions every lost soul or wandering spirit must eventually ask:

Who am I, and where do I come from?

Villaseñor, who is dyslexic, grew up on a Carlsbad rancho and says he couldn't write and didn't read much as a struggling student. But in 1975 he began asking questions of his father, mother, aunts, uncles, cousins. Each answer was the beginning of another chapter in his life, and as an adult he went back to Mexico and found a family story as old as time - a story about love outlasting revolution, displacement, prejudice and death.

It took him 16 years to write the book, he says, and getting it published wasn't easy. But Robyn Solomon, who teaches 11th-grade English at Fairfax, read the book years ago and passed it on to her relatives.

"It became our family book," says Solomon, who introduced "Rain of Gold" to students three years ago. The only book that has had students nearly as enthralled, says Solomon, is "Always Running" by L.A. author Luis Rodriguez. Find a book that connects, Solomon says, and you unleash curiosity.

After "Rain of Gold," students began tracing their own roots, interviewing family members and writing their own histories. Then they wanted to know if Villaseñor would come to Fairfax so they could read him the stories he inspired.

"I sent him an e-mail," says student Tabares. Unbeknownst to her, literacy coordinator Susan Canjura was already making arrangements to bring Villaseñor to Fairfax.

Last Thursday was the big day, and student Alonzo Gonzalez was hoping to meet Villaseñor and hand him a copy of his own story.

"I liked the way he incorporated Mexican and folkloric stories without being scared of not being believed," says Gonzalez. He told me his own Mexican and Salvadoran heritage made "Rain of Gold" all the easier to connect with, because to read it was to better know his own family.

"He just put it out there. Like, these stories about mystical canyons and unbelievable things. I was curious to know if something like that happened to my family, so I thought maybe I should interview them, and I learned all these beautiful stories. Are they true? Yes. I think they're true."

Gonzalez's family tells a story of his Salvadoran grandmother, as an infant, being pulled dripping wet from a raging creek after his great-grandmother prayed at the water's edge.

"God, I know you can hear me," Gonzalez wrote, recreating the family story. "Don't you dare just sit there and do nothing. You can do everything. You're God, for Christ's sake."

How could God not have answered such a prayer? The baby was recovered in Alonzo Gonzalez's story, which he proudly presented to Victor Villaseñor, one writer to another.

"He signed a copy of it for me," Gonzalez says. "I'm going to have it framed."

On Thursday night at Fairfax, Villaseñor told students to open their hearts and pour out their stories. It isn't easy, he said, reminding them of his own academic failures. But there's genius in everyone, he promised.

I watched 14 students perform for Villaseñor, reading portions of their narratives as the author sat in the audience with his boots, blue jeans and fine black cowboy hat.

Lidia Garcia said she learned she was born dead and was miraculously revived, and this discovery has been like a rebirth. Diana Delgadillo said she found inspiration in her grandmother's will to survive during hard times in Mexico.

Each student offered up a powerful story and seemed liberated in the telling. Villaseñor clapped when each student was done, then stood and applauded when all of them were finished.

If it were a scene from a book by Villaseñor, or young Alonzo Gonzalez, angels would have been dancing in the star-filled heavens above Los Angeles - sacred city of a hundred million interwoven stories.

Steve Lopez writes Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. Reach him at [Steve Lopez](mailto:Steve.Lopez@latimes.com) and read previous columns at <http://www.latimes.com/lopez>.