Each other in art, custom, food and friendship. 

In California, he worked and read, got married and read, attended East Los Angeles Community College and read, had children and read and got divorced and read. Also, he raised three teenagers and read and lived to tell the tale.

Then he read and read and looked up to see he had nine grandchildren.

Rueben is more than 40 years a barber, more than 23 in Santa Ana. There were places and times in human history when barbers probably ran everything. They certainly knew everything that went on.

If they loved reading, too, they were formidable forces in the life of their communities. Rueben is a formidable force in the Orange County Latino community and far beyond.

Locally? Consider that most Latino candidates for any political office hold fundraisers in his Santa Ana bookstore. And now with a unique cross-the-alley emporium of children’s books he is reaching for youngsters.

Far beyond? Six years ago, he suggested to Community Leader and Actor Edward James Olmos ideas that became the Latino Book and Family Festival. Wherever it goes—Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, San Jose, San Diego, New York—Rueben’s books anchor a “Book Village” that contributes directly to the goal of encouraging Latino parents to read to their children and children themselves to read. Families come by the thousands.

Acting on his own advice, he reaches for future generations with a unique emporium of children’s books just cross-the-alley from his Santa Ana bookstore. It is full of color and lined with stories in Spanish and English and other languages—Vietnamese, Cambodian, Chinese, and more.

It all makes you wonder. Which is its purpose. Rueben’s life is an open book he seems to read like a child. He turns pages, laughs and says, “What’s this?” Then he tries to tell you he knew it all the time . . . that he planned it.

He is a strong believer we all should write down our goals. He writes his down. No one could have that many! And do credit to them, too.

On a coast-to-coast TV program, he commanded his fathers to be nonexistent husbands: “Take out the trash and read to your children!” He is a sought-after motivational speaker, a consultant to publishers, a friendlyprod to writers and artists, an energizer to teachers and a media personality.

The biggest independent bookstore in Orange County, California, began as a few books for customers in a barber shop. Now he carpets the space next door with kids eager to be read to.

Rueben’s life is an open book with one new chapter after another. He reads on and says, “Amazing!” And then, “That’s me, too!”

Victor Strongs Words to Compute Life X 13

(By Galal Kernahan)

As Victor Villasenor emerged from adolescence, his parents sent him to Mexico City. He was overwhelmed by what he saw. The world suddenly opened, widened, deepened. He became ill. A doctor was summoned. “You are a doctor?” “Yes.” “You are a Mexican?” “Yes,” answered the baffled physician. Victor thought that, though all Mexicans might not be farm workers like his friends on his father’s place in Oceanside, it was unlikely they would be persons in the professions,
New realities shook him. The discovery of books catapulted him into dawning understanding of human landscapes and feelings, striving and failures. A conflicted teenage functional illiterate he started down an endless road to finding himself in writing.

He drove himself for decades ten hours a day, six days a week untiring, re-ordering and retyping strings of words. Eventually, some books reached print and modest success. Then, in 1981, he wrote the made-for-TV motion picture THE BALLAD OF GREGORIO CORTEZ.

Well-wishers came to the large, old Spanish colonial house on a bluff in Oceanside, California. He paid an emotional tribute to his parents, Salvador and Lupe. He promised he would write their lives. All celebrated the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) telecast. The picture was released to movie houses the next year.

In 1991, ten years later, a more-than-500 page work—parts of it laboriously rewritten more than 40 times—became a milestone in Latino literature. RAIN OF GOLD sold more than 200,000 copies in hardcover. Any given copy may have been read by six-to-ten people.

It recounts the Mexican youth of Lupe and Sal: surviving the Revolution, their separate journeys across the Border, how they met on this side. It ends with their marriage in Santa Ana, but not before sketching the personalities of their mothers, Victor’s grandmothers. Idealized the faithful at her church in Corona. Her lively conversations—even arguments—with God and Mary did not go unnoticed.

Now, more than another decade has passed. Victor has gone through multiple rewritings of his latest book. It is about Sal, Lupe and their lives in 1929, 1930 and 1931. It is published by HarperBooks.

Salvador has been dead for years. Lupe passed away in 2000. Both are very alive in pages Victor has filled. So is the cosmically talkative grandmother who, together with Sal, finally makes clear to the author what lies behind all he has been writing.

There have been tumultuous first years of marriage not made any smoother by Sal’s strivings and failures. A conflicted teenage functional illiterate he started down an end- less road to finding himself. In writing.

Victor remembers what his father often told him: Casí todos nacen y mueren y nunca abren los ojos. Poca gente abre los ojos porque no usa todo su sentido. (‘Almost everyone is born and dies without opening their eyes. Few people open their eyes because they don’t try fully to perceive things.’)

What that really might mean became clear in a startling brush with the law. Salvador is driving a truck heavily laden with barrelsful of whiskey in Corona. His well-connected mother is with him. A cop pulls them over. She begins telling God the officer will not see the barrels and that she needs help for her son and that God owes her one and that she wants him to help now. The cop looks in the back of the truck and says, ‘Nothing here, but you better get some air at a gas station because your tires are almost flat.’

Crisis over, Sal asks, ‘How did you do that?’ ‘I always say,’ and explains.

“When people finish this book,” Victor claims. “They are going to think magic is possible.” The title: THIRTEEN SENSES.