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ILLUSTRATION: JOHN RITTER

## Five Authors in the Spotlight: Isabel Allende, Víctor Villaseñor, Jorge Ramos, Javier Sierra, and Cristina García

BY CARLOS J. QUEIRÓS  
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Five of AARP *Segunda Juventud's* favorite authors featured over the last five years answered five questions about their lives as writers and readers.

### Is there one book that inspired you to become a writer?

**Jorge Ramos:** Two books. One is *Interview With History* by Oriana Fallaci. Her confrontational approach to powerful politicians made me believe that a single journalist can change the world with a question. The other book was *Massacre in Mexico (La noche de Tlatelolco)* by Elena Poniatowska. She was the only journalist who reported on the massacre that occurred on October 2, 1968, in which the Mexican army killed dozens and probably hundreds of students. These two women showed me that courage and the desire to look for the truth are crucial elements to becoming a good journalist and a good writer.

**Isabel Allende:** If I had to mention just one, it would be *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. Some critics pointed out his influence in my first novel, and although at the time I was not aware of it, now I see the similarities.

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**Javier Sierra:** [Caballo de Troya](#), a Spanish novel that mixed Jesus's life with the idea of modern time travelers who "jumped" into first-century Jerusalem. I was so impressed that I decided to dedicate my novel [The Lady in Blue](#) to its author, J. J. Benítez.

**Cristina García:** If I had to pick one, it would be the collected poems of Federico García Lorca, and particularly the collection [A Poet in New York](#), for the music of its language, sensibility, and extraordinary attention to detail.

**Victor Villaseñor:** Homer's [The Odyssey](#), because it was my first experience hearing storytelling the way my father told me stories about our family.

### Which book should every Hispanic read? Why?

**Isabel Allende:** [Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent](#) by Eduardo Galeano, because it is a good introduction to the politics and the history of exploitation and imperialism in our continent. We need to be more aware!

**Jorge Ramos:** [The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World](#) by Carlos Fuentes, because he understands better than anyone else that America is a continent, not a country. Reading it, we understand our origins as Hispanics and how much we are linked not only to the rest of the United States but also to the rest of the world.

**Javier Sierra:** Without a doubt, [Don Quixote](#) by Miguel de Cervantes. And not only because it's considered the first modern book of Spanish literature but because modern scholars have discovered traces of old kabbalah and Jewish mysticism among its pages.

**Cristina García:** [Collected Fictions](#) by Jorge Luis Borges, because they will teach you the beauty of compression, intelligence, and poetry. Each story is an extraordinary package, like a Fabergé egg. If you can only read one book, you will get a library's worth in just a collection of his short stories.

**Victor Villaseñor:** My book [Burro Genius](#), and I'll tell you why. Right now, we have respect for the cultures of the Jews, the Greeks, all Europe, the Chinese, and the Japanese. We can't say the same for us *mezclados*, the ones who are part European, part indigenous people, and part black from Africa—those three mixes—who no one respects. What *Burro Genius* does is show that there's another culture with wisdom and the tools of genius that is just as important.

### Has your relationship to writing changed with age? How?

**Isabel Allende:** Now that I'm in my 60s, my style has changed: it is more direct, I use fewer adjectives, my sentences are shorter, and I go straight to the point. Times have changed, literature has changed too, and the fact that I live, work, and read in English has modified my style.

**Jorge Ramos:** Writing has become an essential part of my life as I approach 50 years of age. It is a way to organize my ideas, to contribute something to this society, and to get in touch with those around me. But more importantly, writing allows me to express my innermost thoughts and feelings in ways in which a simple conversation can't.

- Javier Sierra:** My style and subjects of interest have changed with the time. At the beginning, my interests were more phenomenological, and now they are more spiritual. In a way, I feel that I am still growing.
- Cristina García:** I'm less satisfied with describing the surface and more interested in what's less visible but more crucial. I'm more interested in the archeology of character and events rather than the events themselves. In other words, I'm interested in origins and inheritance and how history gets made.
- Victor Villaseñor:** I started writing on the 16th of September, 1960, at six in the morning. And today, 47 years later, I started writing at 4:30 in the morning. So I start earlier because I have so much to say! And my tools are smoother: instead of taking 16 years to write a book, it only takes a couple. But I just felt as excited today when I got up to write as I did 47 years ago.

### The age-old question: If you could bring only three books with you onto a deserted island, which ones would they be? Why?

- Isabel Allende:** I would bring the best possible encyclopedia, a very good survival manual, and a large book with blank pages to write my own stories.
- Jorge Ramos:** [The Autumn of the Patriarch](#) by Gabriel García Márquez, [The Shadow of the Wind](#) by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, and [Paula](#) by Isabel Allende. All of these titles are fantastically well written, explore human complexity, and help us understand our world.
- Javier Sierra:** The Holy Bible, because it's an infinite source of stories, characters, and inspirational ideas. [The Eight](#), a superb novel by Katherine Neville. And a book of only white pages to write on.
- Cristina García:** I would bring books written by Federico García Lorca, Jorge Luis Borges, and Virginia Woolf's [Orlando](#)—although I would probably want to bring a collection of Chekhov too. Can I bring four books?
- Victor Villaseñor:** I'd like to change it to three authors. I would take Homer, Confucius, and myself. I'd take Homer, because he would give me a big opener for the European-based mentality. Confucius to show the wisdom and that wonderful other way of thinking that comes from China. Lastly, my own books to show the new world, the Americas, and the indigenous peoples, so that way I'd have a flavor for the entire planet.

### What are you currently working on?

- Isabel Allende:** I just finished a story about the recent years of my family in California. It is like a sequel to my book [Paula](#). I'm also doing research for a historical novel taking place in the Caribbean in the eighteenth century.
- Jorge Ramos:** My eighth book, [El regalo del tiempo: Cartas a mis hijos](#) [was] published this September in Spanish and [will be published] next spring in English as [The Gift of Time: Letters from a Father](#). I wrote 15 letters to my children about how

much I love them and about all that I have learned as a father, a husband, a son, a traveler, a writer, and a war correspondent. In late 2008 I'll publish my first fiction work, a children's book, *I'm Just Like My Father; I'm Just Like My Mother*.

**Javier Sierra:** A new novel about the power of words and words of power.

**Cristina García:** A new novel tentatively called *The Lady Matador's Hotel*. It's set during one week in and around a Guatemalan hotel where lots of people and things are converging. I've also just polished up a young-adult novel titled *I Want to be Your Shoebox* that's coming out next summer. It's told from the point of view of a 13-year-old girl and her 92-year-old grandfather.

**Victor Villaseñor:** Right now I'm working on *Crazy Loco Love*. It's finished—I'm just going through the final editing—and it will be out spring or summer. It's a continuation of *Burro Genius*, which was my life from kindergarten to 16-years-old. This new book is from ages 16 to 20

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