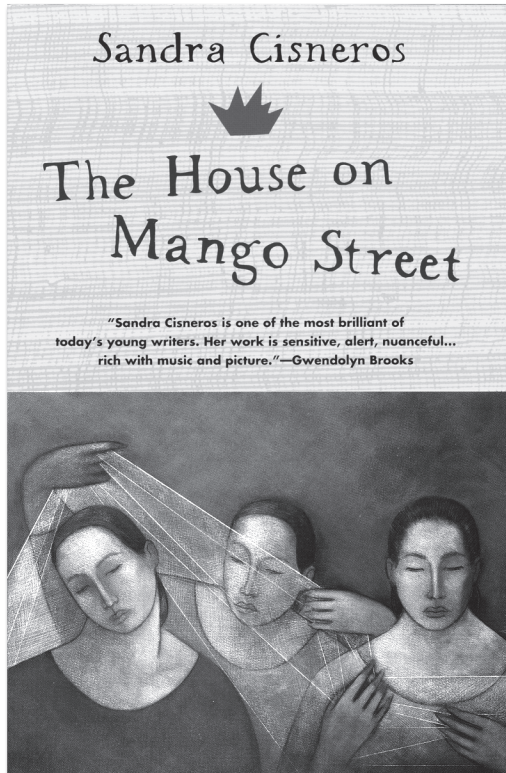


Sandra Cisneros

*"She is nobody's mother
and nobody's wife."*

—Sandra Cisneros, describing herself¹



Pre-Reading Questions

1. Read the words under the title. What do you think that they mean? Do you think Cisneros feels proud or sad when she says this? Explain.
2. Have you ever learned about someone else's culture from stories or poems? If yes, describe what you learned.

Reading Preview

Sandra Cisneros is a popular Mexican American writer. She writes stories about Chicano culture and about strong women. Many U.S. schools use her book *The House on Mango Street*.

Sandra Cisneros

In recent years, a new Chicano literature has emerged. It expresses pride in Mexican culture. It explores the conflicts of living in two cultures at one time. It also looks at the cultural roles of men and women. One of the first writers to write about these themes was Sandra Cisneros.

Cisneros was born in 1954 in Chicago. Her father was from Mexico, and her mother was Mexican American. Spanish was her first language. Cisneros's family was poor. They often moved between Mexico City and Chicago. They never stayed in one place long enough to feel settled.

These constant changes upset Cisneros. She became introverted and shy. She had few friends.

Although the family was poor, her parents valued education. Her mother made sure that Cisneros and her six brothers each had a library card. The house was full of borrowed books. Cisneros was an avid reader. She enjoyed the world of imagination inside books.

Cisneros went to Catholic grade schools. She began writing poems in elementary school. But she kept them private. She didn't feel confident. But when she was in high school, one of her teachers saw her talent. The teacher encouraged Cisneros to join the school literary magazine. She also had Cisneros read her poems in class.

After high school, Cisneros went to Loyola University in Chicago. She majored in English. She began to think about a career as a writer. Cisneros's mother supported her career goals. But her father thought that a woman did not need a career. He believed that her job was to be a mother and a wife. His ideas created tension between Cisneros and him.

After she graduated from college, Cisneros enrolled in the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. This famous writing program helps talented writers develop their skill. Few of the other students came from poor families. And Cisneros was the only Chicano. At first she felt uncomfortable and separate. But in time, her experiences became her inspiration. She said, "I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn't write about."² She wanted to tell stories that were never told before.

Cisneros wrote stories about the people she observed in the barrio—the Hispanic neighborhood. The stories were sometimes funny and sometimes touching. But they were always realistic. She wrote about how Latino culture empowered men. And she showed how barrio life took power away from women. Men made the rules. Women didn't control their own lives. They grew up in the barrio, lived there, and died there. They never left. Cisneros combined these stories into a book called *The House on Mango Street*.

Cisneros used a young female narrator to tell the stories. Her name was Esperanza. In Spanish, *esperanza* means "hope." In the book, Esperanza matures. At the end, she tells about her plans to leave the barrio. She wants her own separate identity. She wants to be equal to men. She says, "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate."³

At first, Cisneros worried that her book betrayed her Chicano culture. She told the world stories that only Chicanos knew. But her book became popular. It sold more than half a million copies. It is now used in schools from middle schools through universities.

After the success of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros received many grants. These grants supported her while she was writing. She published a book of poetry, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, in 1987.

Then in 1991, Cisneros published *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. In this book, Cisneros shows Chicano life on the Mexico/Texas border. She uses a strong feminist voice. She shows powerful women. She expresses her belief in the equality of men and women.

In 1994, she followed with another book of poetry called *Loose Woman*. And in 2002, she published *Caramelo, or, Puro Cuento: A Novel*.

Recently, Cisneros's father finally read some of his daughter's work. He read it in Spanish. He now recognizes her talent. Cisneros feels that they have made peace with one another.

Cisneros currently lives and writes in central Mexico.

In 1995, Sandra Cisneros received a MacArthur Foundation grant. The MacArthur Foundation gives large grants to creative people. Because the grants honor the brightest, most talented people, they are sometimes called "genius grants."

Comprehension

Complete the sentences. Use information from the reading.

1. Because Cisneros didn't like moving often, _____

2. In high school, Cisneros became more confident in her writing when _____

3. There was tension between Cisneros and her father because _____

4. At the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, Cisneros decided _____

5. Cisneros's stories are about _____

6. At the end of *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza plans _____

7. After reading some of his daughter's work, Cisneros's father _____

Fact or Opinion

Work with a partner. Decide if each sentence is a fact or an opinion. Then write *F* for *fact* or *O* for *opinion* in front of each sentence.

- ___ 1. It's good that Cisneros made peace with her father.
- ___ 2. As a child, Cisneros read many books.
- ___ 3. Cisneros found inspiration at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.
- ___ 4. Cultural pride was important in the Chicano movement.

Vocabulary

Look at these words from the reading. Put a check next to words that you know. Underline words that you don't know yet. Find the words in the reading. Try to guess their meanings.

betray
emerge

empower
feminist

inspiration
introverted

literary
touching

Match each word with its definition.

- ___ 1. emerge
 - ___ 2. introverted
 - ___ 3. literary
 - ___ 4. inspiration
 - ___ 5. touching
 - ___ 6. empower
 - ___ 7. betray
 - ___ 8. feminist
- a. to give control or authority to
 - b. to appear
 - c. emotionally moving
 - d. related to literature
 - e. to be disloyal to; to give away a secret
 - f. shy
 - g. a source of ideas
 - h. person who believes that men and women are equal

Reading a Chart

A chart is a useful way to organize facts.

Important Chicano Writers

Writer	Type of writing	Other information
Luis Valdez	plays	He began El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworkers' Theater) in 1965. In 1978, he wrote <i>Zoot Suit</i> . In 1979, it became the first Chicano play on Broadway.
Denise Chávez	novels short stories plays children's books	Her novel <i>Face of an Angel</i> won several awards in 1995. One of them was the American Book Award.
Rudolfo Anaya	novels	He was one of the first writers of the Chicano movement. His 1972 book, <i>Bless Me Ultima</i> , has sold more than 360,000 copies.
Gary Soto	poetry novels children's books	He has published many books of poetry. He has also won many awards. He received two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Fill in the blanks. Use information from the chart.

- _____ and _____ write books for children.
- Rudolfo Anaya's best-known book is _____.
- _____ wrote plays for farm workers.
- Luis Valdez wrote a Broadway play called _____.
- _____ won two National Endowment for the Arts grants.
- Gary Soto writes novels and _____.
- _____ was one of the first writers of the Chicano movement.
- The novel _____ won the American Book Award.

Connecting Today and Yesterday

1. The Chicano movement used different art forms to show cultural pride. These art forms included writing, dance, theater, and painting. Do other ethnic groups today show cultural pride with art? If yes, which groups? How do they show pride in their culture?
2. Cisneros believes that Chicano culture values women less than men. Are women's roles valued as highly as men's in other cultures in the United States? Explain.

Group Activity

Research the Chicano movement in the United States. Bring information to class. In your group, discuss these questions.

1. Who led the Chicano movement? Were they men and women?
2. How did the movement improve job opportunities for Chicanos? For others?
3. How did the movement improve education for Chicanos? For others?

Class Discussion

1. Cisneros and her father expected different things for her life. Cisneros followed her own path. In a conflict like this one, should children follow their own ideas or their parents' ideas? Explain.
2. Cisneros writes about living in two cultures at once. Have you ever lived like this? If yes, what problems did it create?
3. Cisneros worried that she betrayed her culture. What do you think? Is it right to show others negative parts of your culture? Explain.

Reflections

1. What was the most interesting thing that you read in this lesson?
2. Can you use anything from Sandra Cisneros's story in your own life? Explain.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza says, "One day I'll have my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from."⁴

What does she mean?