

Caramelo by Sandra Cisneros

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“Sidelights”

Poet, novelist, and short story writer Sandra Cisneros has garnered wide critical acclaim as well as popular success. Drawing heavily upon her childhood experiences and ethnic heritage as the daughter of a Mexican father and Chicana mother, Cisneros addresses poverty, cultural suppression, self-identity, and gender roles in her fiction and poetry. She creates characters who are distinctly Latina/o and are often isolated from mainstream American culture by emphasizing dialogue and sensory imagery over traditional narrative structures. Best known for *The House on Mango Street*, a volume of loosely structured vignettes that has been classified as both a short story collection and a series of prose poems, Cisneros seeks to create an idiom that integrates both prosaic and poetic syntax. “Cisneros is a quintessentially American writer, unafraid of the sentimental; avoiding the clichés of magical realism, her work bridges the gap between Anglo and Hispanic,” remarked Amer Hussein in the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Born in Chicago, Cisneros was the only daughter among seven children. Concerning her childhood, she recalled that because her brothers attempted to control her and expected her to assume a traditional female role, she often felt like she had “seven fathers.” The family frequently moved between the United States and Mexico. Cisneros periodically wrote poems and stories throughout her childhood and adolescence, but it was not until she attended the University of Iowa’s Writers Workshop in the late 1970s that she realized her experiences as a Latina woman were unique and outside the realm of dominant American culture.

Following this realization, Cisneros decided to write about conflicts directly related to her upbringing, including divided cultural loyalties, feelings of alienation, and degradation associated with poverty. Incorporating these concerns into *The House on Mango Street*, a work that took nearly five years to complete, Cisneros created the character Esperanza, a poor, Latina adolescent who longs for a room of her own and a house of which she can be proud. Esperanza ponders the disadvantages of choosing marriage over education, the importance of writing as an emotional release, and the sense of confusion associated with growing up. In the story “Hips,” for example, Esperanza agonizes over the repercussions of her body’s physical changes: “One day you wake up and there they are. Ready and waiting like a new Buick with the key in the ignition. Ready to take you where?” Written in a simple style that makes each section of the book sound like a prose poem, the pieces in *The House on Mango Street* won praise for their lyrical narratives, vivid dialogue, and powerful descriptions.

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories is a collection of twenty-two narratives revolving around numerous Mexican-American characters living near San Antonio, Texas. Ranging from a few paragraphs to several pages, the stories in this volume contain the interior monologues of individuals who have been assimilated into American culture despite their sense of loyalty to Mexico. In “Never Marry a Mexican,”

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for example, a young Latina begins to feel contempt for her white lover because of her emerging feelings of inadequacy and cultural guilt. And in the title story, a Mexican woman deluded by fantasies of a life similar to that of American soap operas ventures into Texas to marry an American. When she discovers that her husband and marriage share little in common with her TV dreams, she is forced to reappraise her life.

Reviewers have praised the author's vivid characters and distinctive prose in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. Noting Cisneros's background as a poet, Los Angeles Times Book Review contributor Barbara Kingsolver remarked that "Cisneros has added length and dialogue and a hint of plot to her poems and published them in a stunning collection." Writing in the *Nation*, Patricia Hart claimed that "Cisneros breathes narrative life into her adroit, poetic descriptions, making them mature, fully formed works of fiction." Hart also commended Cisneros's "range of characters" as "broad and lively." Kingsolver, who stated that "nearly every sentence contains an explosive sensory image," concluded that Cisneros "takes no prisoners and has not made a single compromise in her language." Similarly, Bebe Moore Campbell, discussing the work in the *New York Times Book Review*, felt that "the author seduces with precise, spare prose and creates unforgettable characters we want to lift off the page and hang out with for a little while."

Eighteen years after the publication of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros published her second novel, *Caramelo*. In what one Publishers Weekly contributor considered to be a "major literary event," this novel, like her first, is heavily autobiographical; it also took nine years for her to write. Although much of it draws on her own life, Cisneros uses other people's stories as a resource, too. As she explained to Adriana Lopez in *Library Journal*, "I did a lot of research on people, like an ethnographer. . . . Much of my book is based on real things. Even if I made things up, I could never match what happens in real life." The main character is a teenager named Celaya Reyes, or "Layla," who is the only daughter of eight siblings just like Cisneros. The story is framed by a trip from Chicago to Mexico City, where the family is going to visit Layla's grandparents in a large reunion involving three generations of Reyes. The narrative goes back and forth between past and present as Layla thinks about her own life--and her desire to assert her true identity within her huge family--and the story of her grandmother, Soledad, who was abandoned as a young girl and who eventually becomes the bitter woman Layla thinks of as "Awful Grandmother." The tales are tied together by a rebozo caramelo, a shawl that has passed down through the generations from the grandmother's mother down to Layla. Whenever Layla touches her lips to the tassels, the smell and taste of it evokes strong memories in her of a family that has experienced both great joy and great tragedy. Critics of *Caramelo* were impressed with Cisneros's descriptive powers and realistic bilingual dialogue. For example, a Kirkus Reviews critic praised "Cisneros' keen eye [which] enlivens descriptions of everything from Chicago's famed Maxwell Street flea market to Soledad's sun-stroked house on Destiny Street"; the reviewer also enjoying the "casually bilingual text." Lopez appreciated the depiction of Mexico City back in the 1920s "when it was the 'Paris of the New World.'" Although a Publishers Weekly contributor felt that the scenes of "cross-generational trauma and rapture" might seem "repetitive" at times, the reviewer asserted that the novel is "a landmark work." Lauding *Caramelo* for being "raucous, spirited, and brimming with energy," *Library Journal* contributor Barbara Hoffert particularly enjoyed the way Cisneros weaves all of the elements of her story together "like the fabric in the caramelo."

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Cisneros is primarily known for her fiction, but her poetry has also gained recognition. My Wicked Wicked Ways is a collection of sixty poems. "Cisneros's poems are intrinsically narrative, but not large, meandering paragraphs," explained Gary Soto in the *Bloomsbury Review*. "She writes deftly with skill and idea, in the 'show-me-don't-tell-me' vein, and her points leave valuable impressions." Writing in *Belles Lettres*, Andrea Lockett commented that "particularly alluring here are the daring, perceptive, and sometimes rough-hewn expressions about being a modern woman." In her 1994 poetry collection, *Loose Woman*, Cisneros offers a portrait of a fiercely proud, independent woman of Mexican heritage. "Cisneros probes the extremes of perceptions and negotiates the boundary regions that define the self," remarked Susan Smith Nash in a *World Literature Today* review of the collection. Discussing her poetry with David Mehegan of the *Boston Globe*, Cisneros stated that her poetry "is almost a journal of daily life as woman and writer. I'm always aware of being on the frontier. Even if I'm writing about Paris or Sarajevo, I'm still writing about it from this border position that I was raised in."

In all her works, Cisneros incorporates Latino dialect, impressionistic metaphors, and social commentary in ways that reveal the fears and doubts unique to Latinas and women in general. She told Mary B. W. Tabor in a *New York Times* interview, "I am a woman and I am a Latina. Those are the things that make my writing distinctive. Those are the things that give my writing power. They are the things that give it sabor [flavor], the things that give it picante [spice]." However, it was not easy for Cisneros to get to the point where she felt comfortable with asserting herself as a feminist writer because of her upbringing. "I think that growing up Mexican and feminist is almost a contradiction in terms," she told Martha Satz in *Southwest Review*. "For a long time--and it's true for many writers and women like myself who have grown up in a patriarchal culture, like the Mexican culture--I felt great guilt betraying that culture. Your culture tells you that if you step out of line, if you break these norms, you are becoming anglicized, you're becoming the malinche--influenced and contaminated by these foreign influences and ideas. But I'm very pleased to be alive among the current generation of women. Many writers are redefining our Mexicanness and it's important if we're going to come to terms with our Mexican culture and our American one as well. . . . I think many of my stories come from dealing with straddling two cultures, and certainly it's something I'm going to deal with in future stories."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born December 20, 1954, in Chicago, IL. Education: Loyola University, B.A., 1976; University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, M.F.A., 1978. Memberships: PEN, Mujeres por la paz (member and organizer). Addresses: Office: Alfred A. Knopf Books, 201 East 50th St., New York, NY, 10022. Agent: Susan Bergholz Literary Services, 17 West 10th St. #5, New York, NY 10011.

AWARDS

National Endowment for the Arts fellow, 1982, 1988; American Book Award, Before Columbus Foundation, 1985, for *The House on Mango Street*; Paisano Dobie Fellowship, 1986; Lannan Foundation Literary Award, 1991; H.D.L, State University of New York at Purchase, 1993; MacArthur fellow, 1995; first and second prize in Segundo Concurso Nacional del Cuento Chicano, University of Arizona.

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CAREER

Writer. Latino Youth Alternative High School, Chicago IL, teacher, 1978-80; Loyola University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, college recruiter and counselor for minority students, 1981-82; Foundation Michael Karolyi, Vence, France, artist-in-residence, 1983; Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, TX, literature director, 1984-85; guest professor, California State University, Chico, 1987-88, University of California, Berkeley, 1988, University of California, Irvine, 1990, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1990, and the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1991.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR

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- Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories, Random House (New York, NY), 1991.
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Author of introduction to *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Culture Meets*, by Virgilio Elizondo, University Press of Colorado (Boulder, CO), 2000. Contributor to periodicals, including *Imagine*, *Contact II*, *Glamour*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Village Voice* and *Revista Chicano-Riquena*.

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