

Caramelo by Sandra Cisneros

1. From the novel's opening epigraph—"Tell me a story, even if it's a lie."—to its end, the relationship between truth, lies, history, and storytelling is an important theme. Posits Celaya, "Did I dream it or did someone tell me the story? I can't remember where the truth ends and the talk begins." For example, clearly the Awful Grandmother is sugarcoating the truth about her marriage to Narciso. What other aspects of the novel are evidently "untruthful"? Is the reader to believe that *Caramelo* is just a "different kind of lie"?
2. Celaya says, "I'm not ashamed of my past. It's the story of my life I'm sorry about." What's the difference?
3. The family history that forms the central story line of *Caramelo* is structured in part chronologically and in part by the relationships formed by different family members. Does this nonlinear plot structure support the assertion that family and history are without beginning, middle, or end, but are, rather, a "pattern"?
4. How does the historical chronology at the end of the novel edify the Reyes family events that take place within the body of the narrative—and vice versa? In other words, since the reader probably read the story before the chronology, how do the fictional family events illuminate the factual chronology of United States and Mexican history? Is *Caramelo* like or different from other historical fictions, such as Alex Haley's *Roots*, with which the reader might be familiar?
5. "We are all born with our destiny. But sometimes we have to help our destiny a little" is a theme emphasized throughout the novel. How is destiny different for Celaya, her grandmother, her parents, and her friend Viva? Celaya says of Ernesto: "He was my destiny, but not my destination." What is the difference?
6. How does the Reyes family view the United States as compared to Mexico? How are the two countries portrayed in *Caramelo* on both political and social levels?
7. How does *Caramelo* reflect the immigrant experience generally for the middle part of the twentieth century, and how have changes within the United States both socially and politically affected the contemporary immigrant experience?
8. For the Reyes family members who immigrate to the United States, which elements of Mexico are preserved in America and which are lost in the process of assimilation? Is it necessary for an immigrant to lose something of his or her original culture in order to assimilate into a new culture and, once assimilated, are the old ways lost for good?
9. Celaya says, "Life was cruel. And hilarious all at once." And when things seem to have reached a low point in her life, she proclaims, "Celaya. I'm still myself. Still Celaya. Still alive. Sentenced to my life for however long God feels like laughing." What attitude does Celaya have toward her own life? What keeps her going?



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- 10.** Inocencio tells Celaya: “Always remember, Lala, the family comes first—la familia.” Does her needy call home to Papa after her episode with Ernesto in Mexico City prove her father right? How does Celaya reconcile her father’s statement about family with her own vision of her future as an independent woman?
- 11.** The first time the word “caramelo” appears in the book is when it is used to describe Candelaria’s skin tone. The second time is to name the color of the Awful Grandmother’s uncompleted rebozo. How are the two events connected? Why might Cisneros have chosen Caramelo for the title? What does the caramelo rebozo mean to Celaya the storyteller? To Celaya the Reyes family member?
- 12.** Cisneros employs elaborate and vivid food metaphors, such as “Regina was like the papaya slices she sold with lemon and a dash of chile; you could not help but want to take a little taste” and “Have you ever been that sad? Like a donut dunked in coffee.” Is taste the strongest sense her metaphors invoke? How does she also invoke the senses of smell, sight, and sound? What does Cisneros achieve stylistically or thematically by invoking these senses?

Source

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