

Caramelo by Sandra Cisneros

Booklist Review: /*Starred Review*/ The author's long-awaited second novel (following *The House on Mango Street*, 1984) is a sweeping, fictionalized history of her Mexican American family. When Celaya (or "Lala") Reyes takes a family vacation from Chicago to Mexico City, she begins a journey from girl to young adult and from the present to the past. Generous digressions trace roots and branches on the luxuriant family tree, telling the tales of ancestors, family members, and sometimes even walk-on players. The book's title refers to an unfinished, candy-colored rebozo (shawl) that comes to symbolize both the interconnectedness of all these individual histories and the author's act of weaving them together. Still, the focus is on Lala, her papa, and the Awful Grandmother, the last a truly wonderful literary creation-- a despotic matriarch guaranteed to frighten young and old but whose wounds, once revealed, are a revelation. By book's end, the different threads of these three lives are snugged into a tight knot. Cisneros combines a real respect for history with a playful sense of how lies often tell the greatest truths--the characters, narrator, and author all play fast and loose with the facts. But, Lala learns, the ability to write your own history also means you must take special care in choosing your fate. The author's gorgeous prose, on-a-dime turns of phrase, and sumptuous scene-setting make this an unforgettable read. (*Reviewed August 1, 2002*) -- Keir Graff

Publishers Weekly Review: /* Starred Review */ "Uncle Fat-Face's brand-new used white Cadillac, Uncle Baby's green Impala, Father's red Chevrolet station wagon"—the parade of cars that ushers in Cisneros's first novel since *The House on Mango Street* (1984) is headed to Mexico City from Chicago, bearing three Mexican-American families on their yearly visit to Awful Grandmother and Little Grandfather. Celaya or "Lala," the youngest child of seven and the only daughter of Inocencio and Zoila Reyes, charts the family's movements back and forth across the border and through time in this sprawling, kaleidoscopic, Spanish-laced tale. The sensitive and observant Lala feels lost in the noisy shuffle, but she inherits the family stories from her grandmother, who comes from a clan of shawl makers and throughout her life has kept her mother's unfinished striped shawl, or caramelo-rebozo, containing all the heartache and joy of her family. When she, and later Lala, wear the rebozo and suck on the fringes, they are reminded of where they come from, and those who came before them. In cramped and ever-changing apartments and houses, the teenaged Lala seeks time and space for self-exploration, finally coming to an understanding of herself through the prism of her grandmother. Cisneros was also the only girl in a family of seven, and this is clearly an autobiographical work. Its testaments to cross-generational trauma and rapture grow repetitive, but Cisneros's irrepressible enthusiasm, inspired riffs on any number of subjects (tortillas, telenovelas, La-Z-Boys, Woolworth's), hilarious accounts of family gatherings and pitch-perfect bilingual dialogue make this a landmark work. Published simultaneously in a Spanish-language hardcover edition (\$24, ISBN 0-375-41509-2). (Sept. 30) — *Staff* (*Reviewed August 12, 2002*) (*Publishers Weekly*, vol 249, issue 32, p275)

Library Journal Review: /* Starred Review */ Raucous, spirited, and brimming with energy, Cisneros's latest is less a novel than a landscape. Readers are carried along with Lala Reyes's family as they routinely motor between Chicago and Mexico to visit the Little Grandfather and the Awful Grandmother. Joining them on this journey are the families of Uncle Fat-Face and Uncle Baby, and it's no surprise that along the way painful secrets emerge, sibling rivalries flare up, and the Americanized children find themselves in a head-on cultural clash with the Awful Grandmother. The text is deftly shot through with references to Mexican and American popular culture, and with all the comings and goings this work could have felt as lumpy as someone's first try at knitting. But Cisneros has the talent to render a narrative as beautifully blended as the fabric in the caramelo, the singular striped shawl Lala inherits from her grandmother, descendant of a renowned shawl-making family. Those who remember the pointillist prose of *Woman Hollering Creek* will be impressed to see that Cisneros knows how to travel. Important for all libraries. [Previewed in *Prepub Alert*, LJ5/1/02; for an interview with Cisneros, see p. 90.—Ed.]—*Barbara Hoffert*, "Library Journal" (*Reviewed September 15, 2002*) (*Library Journal*, vol 27, issue 15, p88)