

*"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.

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."

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 San Antonio, Texas.

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Sandra Cisneros Notes and References

Notes

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2. Sandra Cisneros, quoted in Jim Sagel, "Sandra Cisneros: Conveying the Riches of the Latin American Culture Is the Author's Literary Goal," *Publisher's Weekly*, March 29, 1991, text at www.lasmujeres.com/sandracisneros/cisnerosgoal2.shtml (retrieved July 22, 2004).
3. Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*.
4. Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*.

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