

In The Company of Writers: Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros' writing deals with issues of Chicana identity and explores the challenges of lives marked by the constant migration between Mexico and the United States. Although Cisneros does not describe her work as strictly autobiographical, she does say that the persona in her writing "is also a creation and a fabrication, a composite of my friends and myself all pasted together" (Elliot).

Cisneros draws on her own early experiences as the only daughter in a family with seven children "always straddling two countries ... but not belonging to either culture" (Doyle). Specifically, she addresses the misogynistic attitudes of both cultures and the experience of poverty.



Sandra Cisneros has won many awards, including the 2015 National Medal of Honor, presented by President Obama. She is probably most famous for her book, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), which continues to be required reading in middle school, high school, and university classrooms across the country. Cisneros says she began writing *The House On Mango Street* in part because she was "determined to fill the literary void...trying to write the stories that haven't been written."

She was born in Chicago in 1954, began writing when she was ten years old, holds a MFA degree in Creative Writing from the University of Iowa, and has held a variety of professional positions—working as a teacher, a counselor, a college recruiter, a poet-in-the-schools, an arts administrator, and an advocate for community and literary causes. Her books have been translated into over a dozen languages (Spanish, Galician, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Norwegian, Japanese, Chinese, Turkish, and, most recently, into Greek, Iranian, Thai, and Serbo-Croatian). She currently lives in Mexico. (Biographical information adapted from www.sandracisneros.com/bio.php and *The Story and Its Writer*, by Ann Charters).

In writing about her own work, Cisneros says that she tries to write stories:

"that were a cross between poetry and fiction...[I] wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random point without having any knowledge of what came before or after. Or, that could be read in a series to tell one big story. I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with reverberation." (Charters)

Part of what makes Cisneros' writing so powerful is that she writes from the seemingly small events of daily life. It is in these small snapshots that she is able to capture the tensions that shape the human experience—in this case, being poor, or caught between cultures, or feeling powerless because of one's gender.

Included are the following excerpts from *The House on Mango Street*:

“My Name”

“Those Who Don’t”

“There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn’t Know What to Do”

“The Rice Sandwich”

Some possible questions for discussion:

1. What point is Cisneros trying to make in each of the pieces?
2. When read together, is there an overarching point or theme?
3. How does Cisneros’ work make you feel?
4. What do you notice about her writing style that helps explain how she is able to evoke those feelings in her readers?
5. Do any of Cisneros’ topics make you think of details from your own life that you would like to write about?

Assignment:

1. **Take five minutes to brainstorm and make a list of moment in your life when you had a memorable experience or made an observation. Remember, in Cisneros’ example we see that the important moments—the moments when we really learned something about ourselves or our world—are sometimes the smallest and simplest memories.**
2. **Once you have a list, decide which of the moments you want to retell as a very short story.**
3. **Write the story from the “I” perspective like Cisneros does. Include lots of details (people, places, etc.) to help invite your reader to your moment.**