

Sandra Cisneros

Born in Chicago, Cisneros was the only daughter among seven children. Concerning her childhood, Cisneros 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 because of her father's homesickness for his native country and his devotion to his mother who lived there. Consequently, Cisneros often felt homeless and displaced: "Because we moved so much, and always in neighborhoods that appeared like France after World War II--empty lots and burned-out buildings--I retreated inside myself." She began to read extensively, finding comfort in such works as Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Cisneros periodically wrote poems and stories throughout her childhood and adolescence, but she did not find her literary voice until attending the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop in the late 1970s. A breakthrough occurred for Cisneros during a discussion of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and his metaphor of a house; she realized that her experiences as a Hispanic woman were unique and outside the realm of dominant American culture. She observed: "Everyone seemed to have some communal knowledge which I did not have--and then I realized that the metaphor of *house* was totally wrong for me.... I had no such house in my memories.... This caused me to question myself, to become defensive. What did I, Sandra Cisneros, know? What *could* I know? My classmates were from the best schools in the country. They had been bred as fine hothouse flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city's cracks."

Shortly after participating in the Iowa Workshop, 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, Hispanic 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 what Penelope Mesic called "a loose and deliberately simple style, halfway between a prose poem and the awkwardness of semiliteracy," 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," for example, a young Hispanic woman begins to feel contempt for her white lover because of her emerging feelings of inadequacy and cultural guilt resulting from her inability to speak Spanish. Although Cisneros addresses important contemporary issues associated with minority status throughout *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, critics have described her characters as idiosyncratic, accessible individuals capable of generating compassion on a universal level. One reviewer observed: "In this sensitively structured suite of sketches, [Cisneros's] irony defers to her powers of observation so that feminism and cultural imperialism, while important issues here, do not overwhelm the narrative."

Although Cisneros is noted primarily for her fiction, her poetry has also garnered attention. In *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, her third volume of verse, Cisneros writes about her native Chicago, her travels in Europe, and, as reflected in the title, sexual guilt resulting from her strict Catholic upbringing. A collection of sixty poems, each of which resemble a short story, this work further evidences Cisneros's penchant for merging various genres. Gary Soto explained: "Cisneros's poems are intrinsically narrative, but not large, meandering paragraphs. She writes deftly with skill and idea, in the 'show-me-don't-tell-me' vein, and her points leave valuable impressions." In her poetry, as in all her works, Cisneros incorporates Hispanic dialect, impressionistic metaphors, and social commentary in ways that reveal the fears and doubts unique to Hispanic women. She stated: "If I were asked what it is I write about, I would have to say I write about those ghosts inside that haunt me, that will not let me sleep, of that which even memory

does not like to mention.... Perhaps later there will be a time to write by inspiration. In the meantime, in my writing as well as in that of other Chicanas and other women, there is the necessary phase of dealing with those ghosts and voices most urgently haunting us, day by day."

Sandra Cisneros' father migrated from Mexico leaving a family of some privilege and means; her mother's family, also of Mexican stock, albeit humbler and working class, had been in the U. S. for several generations. The married couple and their seven children travelled constantly between Chicago and Mexico, having to find new living quarters after each trip. Cisneros' childhood was spent in a variety of run-down Hispanic neighborhoods which offered experiences that have found their way into her writing. Constant moves, and changes of schools made Cisneros an introspective child who retreated to books and the writing of poetry. In 1966, her parents purchased their first home, a small two-story bungalow, painted red, in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. Experiences in this north side of Chicago served as inspiration for many of the tales in *The House on Mango Street*. The poet admits she had no awareness of being different from classmates, or even of being Chicana, until her graduation from Loyola University. At best she felt Mexican, maybe even part Puerto Rican because of the neighborhood she had grown up in. All her education had been mainstream English, as had her reading and writing.

Cisneros admits that at the beginning of her graduate studies in Iowa she was very young, immature, and insecure as a person and as writer. She floundered, while imitating a variety of writing styles: her teachers', established authors', even her classmates' in the writing program. None of these approaches worked. At this time Cisneros came to the awareness that she was very different from her elite and privileged classmates, educated in private schools and groomed for the arts. The styles, structures and themes which the workshop encouraged, just did not fit her; she felt like a weed amidst a collection of cultivated hot-house blooms. By probing into her past inner-city life and those experiences she had always been embarrassed about, she found within, the child-voice that emerged in the short tales from *Mango Street*. That side of her life inspired many poems, as well.

Bad Boys is a short collection of poems which demonstrates the early stage of Cisneros' writing. The poem "South Sangamon," talks about a wife-beating scene in the inner city, overheard by a neighboring child and recounted by that child's voice. "Blue Dress" recounts the awkward encounter of a young man with the girl he made pregnant; the visual images are vivid, the lines brief and clipped.

The Rodrigo Poems is a collection that reflects a more mature writer, many texts inspired during Cisneros' travels in Europe. Gone are the child's voice and humorous observations. Instead, one reads about amorous encounters with roguish European men, all of whom can be identified by the name "Rodrigo." In this collection, Cisneros uses much of the style, imagery, and technique that characterizes her most recent work. She uses words as a painter would use brief strokes of a brush; each word, its sound, its shape and placement on the paper, serve to produce a sensation for the reader. Her style could be called minimalist, for its compactness, whether the text take the shape of a poem or of prose; in the balance, Cisneros is essentially a poet. The poem "No Mercy" presents a theme common to Cisneros, that of the unfaithful man who hurts women, who in turn must somehow vindicate themselves. In this text two previous wives have abandoned a pitiful man, plucking from the kitchen sink their long hair, their rings and domestic comb. "You must've said something cruel / you must've done something mean / for women to gather / all of their things."

The Rodrigo poems were included in a later collection of poems titled *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*. In addition to the group of Rodrigo-type poems, there are others, similar in content, based on European travels. Only a few of these texts are voiced by the small child who observes people and events in her neighborhood.

By the time Cisneros published *The House on Mango Street*, she had developed her very own style of poetic prose. The short tales recounted by Esperanza, a fictional adolescent girl, reflect the incisive musings of this young person as she observes other women around her, and then matches their existential situation with what may possibly await Esperanza herself in the future. While humorous in many ways, each story offers a brief portrait of young women in Esperanza's immediate neighborhood, most of whom have less than ideal lives. Thus, the *persona* observes adolescent girls who are rushing

into adult experiences, others who already face the dilemmas of a domineering husband or father, the raising of children, being trapped in a life situation that offers little hope for improvement or growth. In essence, the tongue in cheek humor of each story also reveals a tragic side. This book earned Cisneros a national award as well as important recognition as an author. Her next work received the important recognition of being published by a major U. S. publisher--quite a triumph for a minority writer, many of whom must struggle to get published.

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories is a very rich album of female portraits. The dedication reads: "for my mama....y para mi papa...." signalling both the bicultural and bilingual nature of this work. Although written totally in Cisneros' polished, inimitable style of English, there appear enough Spanish references or words to root the stories in a long tradition of Mexican-American culture. The tales show a progression in narrative voice and in the fictional world depicted. They begin with the voice of the adolescent narrator, found in early poems, and in *Mango*. "Mericans" is a very representative story recounting the dilemma faced by Chicano authors in life and in their art. The protagonists are children born and raised in the U. S. who travel to visit their grandmother in Mexico. While one of them recounts her observations of religious rituals and superstitious beliefs practiced by the older generation, they are addressed in broken Spanish by an American tourist who offers them chewing gum in exchange for taking a snapshot of lovely "native" children. The tourist is perplexed when she hears the children dialogue amongst themselves in perfect English; of course, they admit they are "mericans," a curious neologism signifying a mixture of Mexican and American.

Only the first seven of the twenty-two stories deal with childhood scenes, akin to those in *Mango*. The remaining stories progress through a variety of Hispanic womens' experiences coming from all social and educational classes, as well as many regions of the U. S. Only "The Eyes of Zapata," offers the portrait of the Mexican revolutionary hero's wife; she is the only character in the book who is totally Mexican, and untouched by contact with U. S. cultural values and customs. This narrative is extremely rich in descriptive detail, and while it purports to talk about the man Zapata, it tells even more about the woman narrator, her character strengths, and the power she unobtrusively holds in a culture that is traditionally patriarchal and sexist.

The outstanding fact about all of the stories is that they focus on the conditions of women, are narrated from a woman's vantage point, and describe how women adjust, submit, rebel, or perhaps work through the dynamics of the interrelationship of the sexes. The lead story, which gives the book its title, tells about a young Mexican woman who marries a Mexican-American. Her life goes from poor to wretched, yet towards the end, it is a female network that saves her and shows her there are other ways to exit from her life situation. The beauty and richness in this book is that Cisneros has intricately woven together a myriad of cultural details, popular sayings, folk traditions and legends, in a way not seen before.

Cisneros is a native of Chicago, where she grew up and attended Loyola University, graduating in 1976 with a B.A. in English. Her father was born in Mexico City to a family of means; his wanderlust and lack of interest in schooling led him to travel broadly and to venture into the United States. By chance he traveled through Chicago, met Sandra's mother, and decided to settle there for life. He and his family were influential in Sandra's maturation. Her mother came from a family whose men had worked on the railroad. Sandra grew up in a working-class family, as the only girl surrounded by six brothers. Money was always in short supply, and they moved from house to house, from one ghetto neighborhood to another. In 1966 her parents borrowed enough money for a down payment on a small, ugly, two-story bungalow in a Puerto Rican neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. This move placed her in a stable environment, providing her with plenty of friends and neighbors who served as inspirations for the eccentric characters in *The House on Mango Street*.

The constant moving during her childhood, the frequent forays to Mexico to see her father's family, the poor surroundings, and the frequent changing of schools made young Cisneros a shy, introverted child with few friends. Her love of books came from her mother, who saw to it that the young poet had her first library card before she even knew how to read. It took her years to realize that some people actually purchased their books instead of borrowing them from the library. As a child she escaped into her readings and even viewed her life as a story in which she was the main character manipulated by a romantic narrator.

Cisneros looks back on those years and admits she did not know she was a Chicana writer at the time, and if someone had labeled her thus, she would have denied it. She did not see herself as different from the rest of the dominant culture. Her identity was Mexican, or perhaps Puerto Rican, because of the neighborhood she grew up in, but she mostly felt American--because all her reading was of mainstream literature, and she always wrote in English. Spanish was the private language of home, and she spoke it only with her father. Cisneros knew no Chicano writers in Chicago, and although she was the only Hispanic majoring in English at Loyola, she was unaware of being different--in spite of her appearance, which was considered exotic by her female classmates.

The bulk of Cisneros's early writing emerged in 1977 and 1978. She began writing a series of autobiographical sketches influenced by Vladimir Nabokov's memoirs. She purposely delighted in being iconoclastic, in adopting themes, styles, and verbal patterns directly opposed to those used by her classmates. *The House on Mango Street* was born this way, with a child's narrative voice that was to be Cisneros's poetic persona for several years.

The poem "Roosevelt Road," written in the summer of 1977, is most important to Cisneros because it forced her to confront the poverty and embarrassment she had lived with all her previous years and to admit the distinctiveness of this background as a positive resource that could nourish her writing. In this poem the language is completely straightforward and descriptive of the tenement housing where the poet lived as a child. Lines run into one another, so that the reader is compelled to follow the inherent rhythm, while working on the sense of the message:

We lived on the third floor always

because noise travelled down

The milkman climbed up tired everyday

with milk and eggs

and sometimes sour cream.

Mama said don't play in alleys

because that's where dogs get rabies and

bad girls babies

Drunks carried knives

but if you asked

they'd give you money.