

**Sandra Cisneros (1954 - )**

*Adapted from the Smithsonian Latino Center biography*

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 20, 1954, the third of seven children. The only surviving daughter, she considered herself the "odd number in a set of men." Cisneros's great-grandfather had played the piano for the Mexican president and was from a wealthy background, but he gambled away his family's fortune. Her paternal grandfather was a veteran of the Mexican Revolution, and he used what money he had saved to give her father, Alfredo Cisneros de Moral, the opportunity to go to college. After failing classes due to what Cisneros called his "lack of interest" in studying, Alfredo ran away to the United States to escape his father's anger. While roaming the southern United States with his brother, Alfredo visited Chicago where he met Elvira Cordero Anguiano. After getting married, the pair settled in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods.

Taking work as an upholsterer to support his family, Cisneros's father began "a compulsive circular migration between Chicago and Mexico City that became the dominating pattern of Cisneros's childhood." Their family was constantly moving between the two countries, which necessitated their finding new places to live as well as schools for the children. Eventually the instability caused Cisneros's six brothers to pair off in twos, leaving her to define herself as the isolated one. Her feelings of exclusion from the family were exacerbated by her father, who referred to his "seis hijos y una hija" ("six sons and one daughter") rather than his "siete hijos" ("seven children"). Cisneros's childhood loneliness was instrumental in shaping her later passion for writing.

Cisneros's one strong female influence was her mother, Elvira, who was a voracious reader and more enlightened and socially conscious than her father. Although Elvira was too dependent on her husband and too restricted in her opportunities to fulfill her own potential, she

ensured her daughter would not suffer from the same disadvantages as she did.

Her family made a down-payment on their own home in Humboldt Park, a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood on Chicago's West Side when she was eleven years old. This neighborhood and its characters would later become the inspiration for Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street*. For high school, Cisneros attended Josephinum Academy, a small Catholic all-girls school, where she found an ally in a high-school teacher who helped her write poems about the Vietnam War. Cisneros had written her first poem around the age of ten, and with her teacher's encouragement she became known for her writing throughout her high-school years. In high school she wrote poetry and was the literary magazine editor, but Cisneros claims she did not really start writing until her first creative writing class in college in 1974. After that it took a while to find her own voice. She explains, "I rejected what was at hand and emulated the voices of the poets I admired in books: big male voices like James Wright and Richard Hugo and Theodore Roethke, all wrong for me."

Cisneros was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree from Loyola University Chicago in 1976 and received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1978. It was while attending the Workshop that Cisneros discovered how the particular social position she occupied gave her writing a unique potential. She recalls being suddenly struck by the differences between her and her classmates: "It wasn't as if I didn't know who I was. I knew I was a Mexican woman, but I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, and my class! And it didn't make sense until that moment, sitting in that seminar. That's when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn't write about." She cast aside her attempt to conform to the American literary canon and adopted a writing style that was purposely opposite that of her classmates, realizing that

instead of being something to be ashamed of, her own cultural environment was a source of inspiration. From then on, she would write of her "neighbors, the people [she] saw, the poverty that the women had gone through." Cisneros says of this moment: "So to me it began there, and that's when I intentionally started writing about all the things in my culture that were different from them—the poems that are these city voices—the first part of *Wicked Wicked Ways*—and the stories in *The House on Mango Street*. I think it's ironic that at the moment when I was practically leaving an institution of learning, I began realizing the ways in which these institutions had failed me."

Drawing on Mexican and Southwestern popular culture and conversations in the city streets, Cisneros wrote to convey the lives of people she identified with. Literary critic Jacqueline Doyle has described Cisneros's passion for hearing the personal stories that people tell and her commitment to expressing the voices of marginalized people through her work, such as the "thousands of silent women" whose struggles are portrayed in *The House on Mango Street*.

Five years after receiving her MFA, she returned to Loyola University Chicago, where she had previously earned a BA in English, to work as an administrative assistant. Prior to this job, she worked in the Chicano barrio in Chicago teaching high school dropouts at Latino Youth High School. Through these jobs, she gained more experience with the problems of young Latino Americans.

As a pioneer Chicana author, Cisneros filled a void by bringing to the fore a genre that had previously been at the margins of mainstream literature. With her first novel, *The House on Mango Street*, published in 1984, she moved away from the poetic style that was common in Chicana literature at the time and began to define a "distinctive Chicana literary space," challenging familiar literary forms and addressing subjects such as gender inequality and the

marginalization of cultural minorities. According to literary critic Alvina Quintana, *The House on Mango Street* is a book that has reached beyond the Chicano and Latino literary communities, and is now read by people of all ethnicities. Quintana states that Cisneros's writing is accessible for both Anglo- and Mexican-Americans alike since it is free from anger or accusation, presenting the issues (such as Chicana identity and gender inequalities) in an approachable way. Cisneros's writing has been influential in shaping both Chicana and feminist literature. Quintana sees her fiction as a form of social commentary, contributing to a literary tradition that resembles the work of contemporary cultural anthropologists in its attempt to authentically represent the cultural experience of a group of people, and acknowledges Cisneros's contribution to Chicana feminist aesthetics by bringing women to the center as empowered protagonists in much of her work.

After the success of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros published a short story collection, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, in 1991. Her literary success led to a succession of Writer-in-Residence posts at universities in the United States, teaching creative writing at institutions such as the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan. In addition, she has been the recipient of numerous awards including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1991 and 1998. In 1998 she also established the Macondo Foundation, which provides socially-conscious workshops for writers, and in 2000 she founded the Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral Foundation, which awards talented writers connected to the state of Texas. She lived for many years in San Antonio, Texas, before moving to San Miguel de Allende, a city in central Mexico, where she currently resides.