The House on Mango Street Author Biography: Sandra Cisneros (1954 - )

Sandra Cisneros was born on December 20, 1954, in Chicago, Illinois. She is the third of seven children and the only daughter, so she sometimes felt left out in her brothers’ company. Her father, a Mexican immigrant, worked as an upholsterer and frequently talked about his sons, but not as often about Sandra. Her mother worked in a local factory and completed most chores around the house so Sandra could focus on her schoolwork because she felt an education was very important to her daughter’s future.

Señor Cisneros’s family still lived in Mexico City, so the entire family made an annual trip to spend quality time with their extended family. Each time they returned to Chicago, the Cisneroses unpacked their belongings into a new apartment, and the children enrolled in a different school. Consequently, Sandra Cisneros had trouble making friends and feeling like she belonged. She found reading, especially reading fairy tales, an excellent way to escape her lonely childhood, and she was thankful that it was possible to do so, even in a poor family, with the library card her mother helped her obtain.

In 1966, the family finally moved into a house of their own, which helped the children to stay in one school. When she began high school at Josephinum Academy, an all-girls Catholic school near her house, Cisneros found another place where she felt she belonged. Her classmates and one particular teacher acknowledged her writing talent—especially poetry writing—and encouraged her to continue.

During her college years, first at Loyola University in Chicago and then in the Master’s Program at the University of Iowa, Cisneros found her unique writing voice. At first, she looked around her classes and observed the faculty, realizing that she was very different because she was a woman from a poor neighborhood with a personal identity that was part American and part Mexican. Eventually she discovered that she could pull experiences from her own life, especially the people and places from the neighborhoods of her childhood, to write poems and stories that were both important and interesting.

At first, Cisneros could not make enough money as a full-time writer to pay her bills, so she took a job as a counselor for high school dropouts at Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago in 1978. During the day, she helped the students deal with their personal and academic troubles while encouraging them to focus on their goals. In the evenings, Cisneros gave public readings of her writing and worked on a small chapbook of her poetry, entitled Bad Boys, which was published in 1980 as a limited run. Also that year, she left the high school to take a job as a recruiter at her alma mater, Loyola University, in an effort to encourage more Latino students to attend college. While in both school environments, she continued to meet interesting people and collect their stories, which served as more inspiration for the writing she did in her free time.

In 1982, Cisneros got her first big break: the National Endowment for the Arts awarded her a grant, which allowed her to quit her job and focus only on her writing for a while. She finally had time to put all her short writing pieces together, and the concept for her most famous publication emerged. To get some distance from her home and the people she was writing about, she left the United States to travel around Europe while she revised her little stories, called vignettes. During this time, she also wrote more poems and built friendships with people overseas. These friendships reminded her of how similar all people are, despite their many differences. She returned to the United States in 1984 for the publication of The House on Mango Street, which received so much critical praise for its new style and fresh voice that it won the Before Columbus American Book Award.
Shortly thereafter, Cisneros moved to San Antonio to work with the Guadalupe Arts Center. She immediately found a community in San Antonio that made her feel welcome and comfortable in a way she never felt in Chicago. San Antonio has been her home since. After The House on Mango Street was published, she was also better able to earn money and secure awards and grants that allowed her to focus on her writing.

In 1987, she published a book of poems, My Wicked, Wicked Ways, which further cemented her reputation as a gifted writer and may have been the catalyst for Random House to offer her $100,000 for another book of fiction—the largest advance ever offered a Latino writer at that time. Cisneros used the advance to write and revise a collection of short stories, Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories, which was published in 1991. Her second book of poetry, Loose Woman was published in 1994, and an epic novel entitled Carmelo was published in 2002.

When Cisneros was a child, there were no Mexican writers that served as role models to her. As a young Mexican-American girl, most people expected Sandra to grow up strong, get married, have children, and take care of the home. She has never gotten married or had children because she says she needs the quiet of her home to write, and her books and poems are like her children. Instead Cisneros made a place in the world for herself, where a young Latina can be creative, thoughtful, and intelligent while also being happy and successful. Although she did not have suitable role models for her writing, as a best-selling author and possibly the most famous Mexican woman writer, Cisneros has become a role model for young writers, especially women, who are inspired by her dedication and talent. She has also been able to use her writing as a means of educating non-Spanish speakers about the Latino experience in America, thereby increasing our understanding of the basic human themes of identity, belonging, and home.

Directions: Use the reading, “The House on Mango Street Author Biography: Sandra Cisneros (1954 - )” to answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What is one of the problems Sandra Cisneros faced in her youth? How did she overcome it?

2. Do you find any similarities between your life and Sandra Cisneros’s? If so, what are they?
   If not, what is one part of your life that is completely different from Cisneros’s?
3. In one or two paragraphs, write an even shorter summary of Cisneros’s life, from her birth to the present day, including as many of the important events of her life as you can.


4. What is one life lesson you can learn from Sandra Cisneros’s life? Where do you see that lesson exemplified in her life?


5. What do you think Sandra Cisneros is like, based on the information offered in the article? 
   Give three traits and evidence from the article to support your opinions.