1 Where Life and Art Intersect

Mining an author's life for nuggets of truth about her writing is always a dangerous business, but the autobiographical nature of Sandra Cisneros's work seems to invite such exploration. What makes any biographical study of Cisneros particularly problematic is the fact that she, thank goodness, is still a work in progress. I can't imagine what it would feel like to have scholars combing through the details of my childhood for fateful occurrences or foreshadowing of tragedy yet to come. I also can't imagine what it would be like to be identified as a role model for a generation of young Latinas. Finding a balance between public and private lives must be a constant struggle. Fortunately, Sandra Cisneros's generous heart has found room for her many readers.

> I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong.
>
> —Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

The Early Years

Sandra Cisneros was born in 1954 in Chicago. The only daughter in a family of six boys, she grew up in a bilingual, bicultural community. Her father was the son of a wealthy Mexican landowner, while her mother grew up in poverty, first in Arizona and later in Chicago. "I grew up with a Chicana mother and a Mexican father, and we spoke English to her and Spanish to him" (Benson).

Cisneros's childhood in Chicago was often interrupted by extended trips to her grandfather's large home in Oaxaca, Mexico. While these trips offered a welcome respite from cold winters and crowded apartment living, they also created instability in her life. The family would "let go our flat, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches and head south" ("Ghosts and Voices" 69). On their return to Chicago weeks or months later, the family would move into one more ramshackle apartment in yet another run-down neighborhood. The children would be enrolled in one more Catholic school to take up their U.S. lives where they had left off.

This early movement between cultures made Cisneros acutely aware of what it meant to live between two cultures. She often felt like an outsider in both places. Though she looked like a native in Mexico, she knew she was merely a visitor on a circumscribed vacation. Chicago, where she looked so different from the images on television and spoke a "foreign" language at home, was her family's home. Over time, Cisneros came to understand the cultural richness of living in two worlds, but as a child she lived with many contradictions. In the vignette "Those Who Don't" from *The House on Mango Street,* Esperanza—her fictional self—explains, "All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight" (28).

Being the only girl in a family of boys further isolated Cisneros. Her traditional Mexican father believed that "daughters were meant for husbands" (Rodriguez Aranda 68). Her brothers paired off and for the most part left her to dream on her own. "These three sets of men had their own conspiracies and allegiances, leaving me the odd-woman-out forever" ("Ghosts and Voices," 69). Cisneros credits her feisty mother with giving her the courage to break through traditional barriers to create a life outside the boundaries that ethnicity and gender seemed to dictate as her future.

Cisneros has called her own education in Chicago's public schools "rather shabby" (Chavez 99) and often shares with groups of schoolchildren stories about her fifth-grade report card. "I had C's and D's in everything. . . . The only B I had was in conduct. But I don't remember being that stupid" (Tabor). In school she considered herself more of a reader than a writer, but in high school she began writing poems and editing the Josephium High School literary magazine. It was during this period that Cisneros began to consider the possibility of becoming a writer.

> I don't know when I first said to myself I am going to be a writer. Perhaps that first day my mother took me to the public library when I was five, or perhaps again when I was in high school and my English teacher forced me to read a poem out loud and I became entranced with the sounds, or perhaps when I enrolled in that creative writing class in college, not knowing it would lead to other creative writing workshops and graduate school. ("Notes to a Young[er] Writer")

In 1972 Sandra Cisneros enrolled at Loyola University in Chicago as an English major. With the encouragement of one of her professors, she applied and was accepted into the M.F.A. program at the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Cisneros described her experience at this famous institution in a 1986 lecture at Indiana University. The text of her speech, "Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession," has been widely anthologized and is a must-read for anyone who works with young writers. In it she explains how she was able to stop writing what she thought others wanted and begin to write what she knew. "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. Sometimes I am writing the same story, the same poem, over and over." It was during her time in the Iowa Workshop that Sandra Cisneros began writing the sketches that would later become *The House on Mango Street.*

Turning Students' Own Lives into Art

I often use Cisneros's essay "Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession" to help me persuade students that their own childhood experiences are a rich source of material for writing. Like the young Cisneros, many believe that writing should be made of sterner stuff, serious subjects that exude insight and importance. As a result, they sit, pen in hand, paralyzed by the blank page.

To get those pens moving, I ask students to bring in a snapshot of themselves as small children. Any age will do, but most of the best writing has been inspired by photographs taken when the student was between the ages of four and ten. There's something about a baby picture that inspires foolishness rather than reflection. The photos that work best are often also of particular moments that students remember well: a disastrous birthday party, their first Holy Communion, holding a treasured pet or trophy, standing beside a beloved relative. It is sometimes a bit of a struggle to get a whole class to bring in a photo on the same day, so I announce the assignment a week ahead of time, which gives me four extra days of nagging before I actually begin the writing lesson. If for any reason a student has no pictures available, I simply tell him or her to use a student ID photo or driver's license.

I then show the class a black-and-white snapshot of me on the first day of fifth grade (see Figure 1.1). They laugh (with good reason), and I tell them what I remember of that day. I tell them how proud I was of my brand new pleated wool skirt—a hideous, long thing, scratchy and bright orange—and my new glasses with blue frames. I talk about how I remember that I had heard that the fifth-grade teacher was hard and mean, but that I was still glad school was starting. Mostly I remember a feeling of relief that a boring summer was finally over.

I then instruct students to look at their own photographs very carefully and record every detail they see and remember:

- what they were wearing and how they remember feeling about these clothes

Figure 1.1 Carol Jago (then Crosetto) on the first day of school, 1961.

- the setting of the photograph, what time of year it was, what time of day
- who else is in the picture and the relationship of this person to themselves
- anything they might be holding or touching and what this object meant to them
- the reason the photo was taken and who took it
- their facial expression, what they were thinking at the time
- what they think or feel now as they look at their “former” self

After they’ve spent about fifteen minutes in intense observation, I tell them to show the photo to a partner and talk about it. Within a few seconds, the room explodes with stories and laughter. The photos act as windows to the world of their childhood, and most students find they have lots to say. Those who don’t often ask for permission to bring in another picture they think would be “better.” Of course!

The next day I have students bring out the photo again, and this time I ask them to write a letter to their younger self. I offer the following sample based on my own photo:

> Dear Carol,
>
> Stop letting your mom cut your bangs. You look like a dork. Forget the pin curl perm at the sides, too. I know you think those glasses make you look cool, but you are wrong.
>
> Stand up straight. Keep reading. And be nicer to your sister. Sometimes you can be insufferable.
>
> Fondly,
Your grown-up self

Students find the letter format an easy one to follow and soon have a missive drafted. The purpose of this letter writing is to move students beyond simple description into reflection. I want their autobiographical pieces to be more than a retelling of a childhood incident; I'm hoping that their present self, as well as their child self, will be present in the piece. Such things have always seemed to me to be easier to inspire than to assign. We read a few of Sandra Cisneros's vignettes from *The House on Mango Street* and talk about how even though the narrator is the child Esperanza, we know that the writing hand is somehow her older self. I then ask students to write a vignette of their own based on a photograph.

Esmeralda Ruiz, a stylish and self-conscious tenth grader, brought in a picture of herself at five years old posing on her front lawn in a yellow bikini. She wrote:

> **Beauty Queen**
>
> Dreaming of Miss America, I practice smiling for the camera. The dry grass scratches my legs, but even at 5, I know that sometimes you need to suffer for beauty. Curly hair halos my little face. It's wispy like angel hair. Propped on an elbow, waiting for my mom to snap the picture, I smile my biggest smile. I am wearing my favorite bathing suit, a yellow string bikini framing a baby brown tummy. That day, I knew I was beautiful. Wish I felt that way every day.

A few students asked if they could write a poem instead, and I couldn't see why not, particularly given the poetic nature of Sandra Cisneros's prose. Like Esmeralda's vignette, Jason's poem "Tigers in the Backyard" seemed to strike just the balance I was hoping for between concrete description of a childhood scene and an awareness of the scene as memory:

Tigers in the Backyard

The four zones of the backyard:
The icy concrete court
The shady passageway
The wide open swing set grass
The wilderness behind the bushes

In the wilderness lurks
(I am sure)
wild Tigers
felines who crossed the Bering Strait
years ago to prowl in my backyard

"No one knows we're here"
they whisper as they hunt and roam
but they don't know that
I know their secret.
I know what to do.

With my new shovel,
I create a Tiger trap
It takes weeks to complete
Digging is hard
When the shovel is taller than you

Masked with dry leaves
The hole sat
And did what holes do
When they aren't catching Tigers

I never did catch a Tiger in my trap
Though I may have caused
The gardener to trip
Once or twice.

—*Jason Kligier*

Just as Sandra Cisneros found her writing voice when she began to write about what she knew, many of my students seem to find theirs when they write from childhood snapshots.

The Evolution of the Artist

After earning her M.F.A. from the University of Iowa, Cisneros returned to Chicago where she worked at the Latino Youth Alternative High School. She wrote about this teaching experience in the foreword to Gregory Michie's book *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students.* The last paragraph comparing learning to write with learning to teach struck me where I live.

> I was once a teacher of high school students. Back in 1977, fresh out of graduate school, I took a job teaching at an alternative high school on Chicago's South Side. It was a small school aimed primarily at returning "dropouts," although "dropout" didn't exactly fit their histories. Some of our kids were pushed out of school because they were parents. Some never went back because they were afraid of getting beat up by violent classmates. Some were with us because they had learning disabilities and were barely literate. Most had poor study skills and worse self-discipline habits that had contributed to their failure in the public schools. All of them wanted another chance at finishing their education in order to find a decent job.
>
> Even though I had minored in education and completed my student teaching in a Chicago public school, I wasn't prepared for my young students. After having spent 2 years in the Iowa Writers' Workshop listening to my classmates ramble on endlessly about meter and metaphor, it seemed incredible to be dealing daily with students who came to school with a black eye from a boyfriend or the calamity of another unwanted pregnancy. My kids had survived drive-by shootings; witnessed children robbing immigrants at gunpoint; saved their babies

> from a third-floor flophouse fire by tossing them to neighbors below, then jumping; worked the night shift at a factory job they hated; run away from home and been homeless; hid the secret that they could not read; watched a father beat up their mother; drank and drugged themselves till they passed out; mothered three kids before they were eighteen; and a multitude of other outrageous experiences that would've made my Iowa Writers' Workshop classmates faint.
>
> My students were not the greatest writers, but, man, could they talk a good story. They may have dropped out of high school, but they held doctorates from the university of life. They were streetwise and savvy; they were ingenuous and fragile. They had seen troubles the world's head of state would never see. In their short years on the planet they had lived extraordinary lives, and nobody had told them their lives were extraordinary, that they were extraordinary for having survived.
>
> Needless to say, I made a lot of mistakes those first years. Eventually I came to realize that teaching was like writing. Just as I had to find my writing voice, I also had to find my teaching voice. They both came from my center, from my passions, from that perspective that was truly mine and made me different from any other teacher. To get there I had to take the same circular route as writing. I had to be intuitive, and I had to be willing to fail. (ix–x)

During this time, Cisneros continued to write and began giving readings as part of the Chicago Transit Authority's poetry project. In 1982 she received her first National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant, which allowed her to move to Massachusetts and complete *The House on Mango Street.* Published by Arte Público Press in 1984, the book met with rave reviews, receiving a Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award. It quickly became an underground classic and found its way into the syllabus of cultural studies courses at many universities. Mainstream readers, however, were unlikely to find the book at their local bookseller.

Cisneros then moved to San Antonio to take a job as arts administrator of the Guadalupe Arts Center. She felt much at home in this town where the cultures of Mexico and Texas blended. She felt that the

> landscape matches the one inside me, one foot in this country, one in that. . . . A place where two languages coexist, two cultures side by side. Not simply on street signs and condominiums. Not simply on menus and bags of chips. But in the public and private, sacred and profane, common and extraordinary circumstances of that homeland called the heart. (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 298)

Unfortunately, the arts grants ran out and the economic reality of supporting herself forced Cisneros to leave San Antonio for a guest lectureship at California State University, Chico. There she struggled to find a balance between teaching and her own writing. Loving both, she could not find enough hours in the day to do both well. A second NEA fellowship allowed her to focus on her writing, and soon afterward she sold *Woman Hollering Creek* to Random House/Vintage, which also purchased the rights to and reprinted *The House on Mango Street*. *Woman Hollering Creek* is a collection of stories focusing on the lives of girls and women in the Latino community, strong females who struggle with the daily business of living in the barrio. Though each story can stand alone, the thread of strong women unites them. Cisneros's books were finally accessible to a wide audience of readers.

In 1991 *Woman Hollering Creek* won Cisneros the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction. Success with this collection and her book of poetry *My Wicked Wicked Ways* allowed her to move back to Texas. There she purchased her first home, a Victorian house in King Williams, a historic area near old San Antonio. When in

1997 she decided to paint the house bright purple, her neighbors were outraged. They felt Cisneros had violated the peaceful hue of their community. In her testimony before the King Williams Design Review Committee, Cisneros stated, "We don't exist. . . . [W]here is the visual record of our people[?] Are we to accept the version of the sleepy Mexican under the sombrero? . . . Are we only present in the food you like to eat? . . . Is our history to be told by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas?" The controversy reminded many of her loyal readers of the lines from *The House on Mango Street:*

> Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.
>
> Only a house quiet as snow. . . .(108)

In 1995 Cisneros received a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," allowing her the financial freedom to continue to write and speak out on issues close to her heart. Through word and deed, she continues to inspire a generation of young writers and readers.

Further Resources

- An audiocassette of Sandra Cisneros reading *The House on Mango Street* is available from Random House (1998). I found it a lovely way to bring the author's voice into my classroom.
- Other poems that work well as models for writing from photographs are Raymond Carver's "On an Old Photograph of My Son" and "Photograph of My Father in His Twenty-second Year."