

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Critical Survey of American Literature offers profiles of major U.S. and Canadian writers from all time periods, accompanied by analyses of their significant works of fiction, drama, poetry, and nonfiction. This six-volume set covers 412 writers at the heart of literary studies for middle-school, high-school, and college students and at the center of book discussions among library patrons and other general readers.

REVISION DETAILS

The original set, titled *Magill's Survey of American Literature*, was published in 1991 profiled 266 writers. A revised edition, published in 2007, added 73 new authors and included Canadians for the first time. The current revised edition adds an additional 73 authors. Coverage now includes historical figures such as Charles Brockden Brown, George Washington Cable, and Booth Tarkington who had been omitted from earlier editions, as well as new authors such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, Junot Diaz, and Jennifer Egan who have only recently become prominent. This edition strengthens coverage of young adult literature with entries on Lev Grossman, Daniel Pinkwater, and Rick Riordan, and of Canadian literature with entries on Margaret Laurence, Yann Martel, and Mordecai Richler. Entries on Marie-Claire Blais, Julien Green, and Isaac Bashevis Singer recognize that the literature of the United States and Canada has not been written exclusively in English. Specialists from three continents were recruited to cover this wide range of scholarship.

FORMAT AND CONTENT

Critical Survey of American Literature is arranged in an A-Z format, beginning with nature essayist Edward Abbey and ending with young adult novelist and playwright Paul Zindel. The essays vary from approximately six to thirteen pages in length. Each one begins with a block of reference information in a standard order:

- Name by which the author is best known;
- **Born:** Place and date of birth;
- **Died:** Place and date of death;
- A statement explaining the writer's literary importance.

The main text is divided into the following sections:

- **Biography** – a chronological overview of the author's life;
- **Analysis** – a discussion of the author's style, dominant themes, and other literary characteristics;
- **Works** – profiles of one or more of the author's individual titles (novels, novellas, plays, poems, short stories, essays);
- **Summary** – one or two brief paragraphs summarizing the author's legacy.

Each title section lists the year in which the work was first published. For short stories, poems, essays, or other short pieces, a collection of the author's works in which the reader can find the title is also indicated.

Every essay ends with a bibliography listing both the author's works in all genres (By the Author) and sources for further study (About the Author) and contains the thought-provoking "Discussion Topics" sidebar. All essays include the byline of the expert who wrote the entry. In addition, more than 800 author portraits and photographs of book covers illustrate the text.

REFERENCE FEATURES

Each volume begins with the Table of Contents for that volume, including the works featured in the title sections, and a Complete List of Contents for the entire set.

The following valuable features can be found at the end of Volume 6:

A **Glossary** defines crucial literary terms for the reader.

CRITICAL SURVEY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

A **Category List** groups authors by the following:

- African American/African Descent
- American Indian
- Asian American/Asian Descent
- Canadian
- Gay or Bisexual
- Jewish
- Latino
- Nonfiction Writers
- Novelists
- Playwrights
- Poets
- Short-Story Writers
- Women
- Young Adult Authors

A **Title Index** lists all featured works.

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SANDRA CISNEROS

Born: Chicago, Illinois; December 20, 1954

Cisneros was one of the first United States Latina writers to win a wide reading audience outside the Latino community.

BIOGRAPHY

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 20, 1954, the only daughter in a family of seven children. Her mother, Elvira Cordero Anguiano, was a self-educated Mexican American who kindled her children's enthusiasm for reading by taking them to libraries. Her father, Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral, was a Mexican upholsterer who regularly moved the family between Chicago and Mexico City.

In Chicago Catholic schools, where expectations for Mexican American girls were low, Cisneros was a below-average student, but she read voraciously and began writing early. After graduating from Loyola University in Chicago in 1976, she earned a master's degree at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she learned "what I didn't want to be, how I didn't want to write."

Upon returning from graduate study to Chicago, she awakened to what she called the "incredible deluge of voices" that has become the hallmark of her writing. Her stories and poems reveal a variety of voices, Mexican American voices mainly, telling their stories in an exuberant mixture of English and Spanish.

Her writing career started slowly. She earned her living as a teacher, college recruiter, arts administrator, writing teacher, and lecturer. Her choice to remain poor in order to write puzzled her father and brothers and often caused her to wonder whether she was betraying her beloved Mexican American culture by choosing a nontraditional life. She wrestled with the problems of how to be a liberated woman and remain a Latina.

Cisneros's fiction and poetry are widely anthologized, and *The House on Mango Street* is frequently taught in schools and colleges. Random House issued a one-volume selection from her fiction and poetry, *Vintage Cisneros*, in 2004. She has won a number of honors, including two National Endowment of the Arts Fellowships for fiction and poetry (1988, 1982), a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1995), and a Texas Medal of the Arts (2003). She has received several grants and guest lectureships, and honorary degrees from Loyola University, Chicago (2002), and the State University of New York at Purchase (1993). *Caramelo* (2002) was named a notable book of the year in several newspapers, including *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

Cisneros has a Web site with biographical information and images and links to reviews and interviews. In June, 2003, Cisneros wrote at her Web site, "I currently earn my living by my pen. I live in San Antonio, Texas, in a violet house filled with many creatures, little and large." In interviews, she reports that in San Antonio she found a rich source of voices for her stories and poems as well as an increasing independence that confirmed her in the choice of a nontraditional life, which she described as being "no one's mother and nobody's wife." Cisneros has come to see a main purpose of her writing as helping people to see their lives more clearly. This help often takes the form of showing that "we can be Latino and still be American."

ANALYSIS

In a 1991 interview, Cisneros spoke of the "deluge of voices" she heard upon returning to Chicago

after studying in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She said she was "fascinated by the rhythms of speech." Both her fiction and her poetry may be described as a deluge of voices, for virtually all of her fiction and some of her poems take the general form of the dramatic monologue.

A dramatic monologue is a literary work that consists of a speech such as one might hear in ordinary conversation, or especially in a play. A good example is "Los Boxers," in which a talkative widower in a laundromat explains to a young mother how he has learned to do his laundry systematically, effectively, and cheaply, without any perception of the irony of his giving this information to a Latina—for whom such work is traditionally a life sentence and who presumably still knows a good deal more about doing laundry than he does.

Cisneros's stories more often take the form of an internal monologue. The reader follows the speaker's inner thoughts as if he or she were saying them out loud in a distinctive voice; often the speaker is engaged in some specific actions while thinking. An example is "My Friend Lucy Who Smells Like Corn," a story that communicates the joys of youthful friendship in a poor neighborhood. The speaker breathlessly describes her friend while recounting past and current activities and adventures, including snatches of dialogue. She reveals her pleasures in playing at Lucy's house with her friend's eight sisters and tells of her wish for sisters of her own so that she could sleep with them "instead of alone on a fold-out chair in the living room."

Almost every story and many poems seem to be spoken aloud, even if there is not a specific dramatic situation. Even when a story clearly consists of recorded writing, as opposed to speech, Cisneros emphasizes a particular writing voice. For example, in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," she presents notes left at shrines, notes thanking or making requests of various saints. Each note is a story told in a unique voice that reveals the personality of the writer, his or her situation and cultural background, and the writer's conception of the addressed saint as a listener. Though forms of the dramatic monologue and closely related letter forms are favorites for Cisneros, she occasionally tells stories in the third-person voice, and many of her poems seem to be in her

own voice, describing her own family and acquaintances.

Readers will recognize similarities between characters in her stories and members of her family. The Reyes family of *Caramelo* and the Cordero family of *The House on Mango Street* are based on her own family. While these novels and several of her stories contain autobiographical elements, Cisneros points out that these always are fictionalized and not literal stories from her life.

Cisneros's main themes include the position of women in Latino culture, the problems of Latinas who want to live independent lives, and the complex relations between Anglo-Americans, Mexican Americans, and Mexicans. She also gives considerable attention to religious themes, reflecting her ambivalence toward her family's Catholicism and her eventual conversion to Buddhism, which she says allowed her to maintain her devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Although Cisneros has clear political concerns that appear in virtually all of her work, her stories and poems are rarely political or moral tracts. Even the parable "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman" presents portraits without explaining the meanings readers should see in the depiction of the two characters.

As Cisneros has said in interviews, one of her purposes as an artist is to change the way in which people see their world. Her works thus often present a picture of Latino life from a point of view that reveals aspects that ordinarily might be hidden. For example, in "Los Boxers," there is no moralistic voice that points out the irony of a middle-aged widower telling a mother how to do laundry. The man simply talks, and the irony is left for the reader to discover. As one thinks about such a story with its new point of view on "women's work," further discoveries about political meanings in the story may emerge, such as, for example, what it means that a man finds the problems of doing laundry interesting to think and talk about.

Furthermore, in the context of traditional Latino culture—in which the ideal woman passively serves men, obeying her father and then her husband, giving her life to housekeeping and motherhood—the story of a Latino advising a Latina about laundry takes on another dimension. For example, "Los Boxers" opens with a child dropping and breaking a bottle of soda, setting up a situation in which the mother, following orders,

cleans up the glass and mops away the spill, while the man watches and lectures. He never thinks of helping her; in his culture, this is unthinkable, even for a man who has learned to do his own laundry. Because Cisneros usually avoids overt political statement, confining herself to pointed description or letting her characters speak, readers are encouraged to explore implicit meanings of the presented experience.

THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

First published: 1984

Type of work: Novella

In a mid-twentieth century Chicago barrio, a Latina enters her teen years, struggling to become the person she envisions herself being.

The House on Mango Street is Cisneros's best-known work. Though it is made up of stories and sketches, some of which have been published separately, the collection has the unity of a novella. Cisneros has described the book as a connected collection, "each story a little pearl. . . . the whole thing like a necklace." In her own mind, Esperanza Cordero, the narrator, has one main problem: She wants to have a house of her own. As the story develops, the meaning of having a house of her own grows richer and more complex, until finally, she understands that she wants not only a literal house but also "a home in the heart." Furthermore, her one problem connects with many other problems that are clearer to the reader than to Esperanza, especially problems related to the roles and treatment accorded women in her culture and the problems of being Mexican American in U.S. culture.

Esperanza is the older of two daughters and has two brothers. Her wish for a house grows out of the family desire that is realized when they buy the house on Mango Street. This turns out not to be the home of which they have dreamed, with a large yard and many bathrooms, but the house they can afford, in a neighborhood being transformed into a ghetto. Esperanza's disappointment sparks her wish. She also realizes after moving to Mango

Street that she does not want to live her life as do most women whom she knows. She is named after her great-grandmother, a woman who refused to marry: "Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. . . . And the story goes she never forgave him."

Having inherited her great-grandmother's name, Esperanza believes that she also has inherited her nature, a determination to be strong and to live independently. After young Esperanza is sexually assaulted at a carnival, she decides that she wants a house that belongs to her alone, not to any man. Her own bad experience confirms what she sees everywhere: that many women are seen as servants and property, their power and imagination imprisoned in houses that belong to husbands and fathers.

To Esperanza, a house comes to mean not only freedom from sexual oppression but also the freedom to pursue her vision of herself as an artist. Several times, Esperanza receives mysterious messages from seemingly spiritual sources that reveal what she must do to become an artist. Elenita, a medium, tells her mysteriously that she will have "a new house, a house made of heart." At the wake for her friend Lucy's baby sister, Esperanza meets three elderly sisters who see something special in her. They take her aside and tell her to make a wish. Seeming to know that Esperanza has wished to go away, they tell her, "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. . . . You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you."

These messages tell Esperanza that she is destined to be a writer, to create an imaginary home out of the materials of her heart, which she will take with her wherever she goes and which will call her back to help those who are unable to leave. Near the end of the book, Esperanza's friend Alicia asks her a question: If she does not return to make Mango Street better—presumably a better place for women and for Latinos—then who will do so? Esperanza then begins to see that, as a poet and storyteller, she will have a mission, to return not necessarily literally but certainly in her heart and mind, to make her people better known to themselves, to each other, and to the rest of U.S. culture.

“WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK”

First published: 1991 (collected in *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories*, 1991)

Type of work: Short story

A young Mexican woman is disillusioned by her marriage to a Mexican American man.

In “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cisneros describes the experiences of an ideal Mexican wife, Cleófilas. Having grown up with her father, six brothers, and no mother, Cleófilas learns how to be a woman by watching *telenovelas* on television. She learns to expect that passion will fill her life. This passion will be the great love of her life, which will give it direction and meaning, so that “one does whatever one can, must do, at whatever the cost.” This, she believes, is how life should be, “because to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow. In the end.” To be complete as a woman, she need only wait for her lover to appear and carry her away into “happy ever after.”

Her husband, Juan, carries her away from Mexico to Seguin, Texas, where she finds no community or family to support her, living in a comparatively isolated home and without independent means of transportation. Aware of the role of a good wife, she learns how to fit gracefully in with Juan’s life. She cares for his house and bears a son, Juan Pedrito. Both she and Juan, however, are foreigners in Seguin. His work is menial and does not pay well enough for the minimum standard of life in Texas. By the time she is pregnant with their second child, he has taken to beating her regularly, partly as a way of dealing with his frustration and powerlessness.

As their relationship deteriorates, Cleófilas comes to realize that this marriage does not contain the passion she learned about in the *telenovelas*. She thinks about her situation while sitting next to Woman Hollering Creek, her baby in her lap; she sometimes wonders whether the woman after whom the creek is named cries out in pain or in rage. She finally realizes that she can do nothing herself to make the marriage

right, and she wonders whether the arroyo was named after *La Llorona*, the weeping woman who drowned her own children, in the stories of her childhood.

Finally, she returns to her father, disillusioned but still the passive woman depending upon men to care for her. To make her escape, she gets help from a woman who provides a glimpse of another way to live. Felice gives her a ride in her truck on the first part of her escape. That Felice lives alone, takes care of herself, and owns a truck—in short, that she lives much as a man does in Cleófilas’s experience—astonishes Cleófilas. She continues to think about Felice long after her return to Mexico, and she tells others about this woman who, when they crossed the creek upon leaving Seguin, hollered like Tarzan: “It was a gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water.”

“LITTLE MIRACLES, KEPT PROMISES”

First published: 1991 (collected in *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories*, 1991)

Type of work: Short story

A collection of notes left at saints’ shrines ending with a long letter from a young woman who has achieved faith in herself.

“Little Miracles, Kept Promises” is a catalog of Cisneros’s strengths and appeals as a fiction writer. The collection of notes left at saints’ shrines may recall the letters of Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), but the tone of these is more consistently comic, showing well the witty and humorous side of Cisneros that appears in many of her stories and poems. For example, Barbara Ybañez threatens to turn the statue of San Antonio de Padua upside down until he sends her “a man man. I mean someone who’s not ashamed to be seen cooking or cleaning or looking after himself.”

Rubén Ledesma somewhat reluctantly, yet desperately, appeals to San Lázaro, who was “raised from the dead and did a lot of miracles,” to help

him deal with his “face breaking out with so many pimples.” These letters are especially rich in the variety of voices and tones they present, from the devout who speak to their saint as a friend, to the pious who lapse into almost meaningless formulas, to the inexperienced who are uncomfortable addressing a person they do not know personally, to the irreverent and skeptical.

These many voices lead finally to that of a young woman, Rosario, who has cut off a braid of hair that has never before been cut and pinned it by the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Rosario is an image of Cisneros, the young Latina artist rebelling against the restrictive roles of women in her culture, especially as they have been reinforced by the massive cultural authority of the Catholic Church. She says that she has resisted religious belief until her discovery that the Virgin is not simply a passive sufferer but also one manifestation of woman as goddess, the powers of fertility, healing, creative energy. This discovery made it possible for Rosario to love the Virgin, to stop being ashamed of her mother and grandmother, and, finally, to love herself.

Of Rosario, Cisneros said, “That’s me. . . . I’m very, very much devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe but not exactly the same figure celebrated in Church.”

CARAMELO

First published: 2002

Type of work: Novel

A Latina tells the painful and humorous story of her family at the request of her dead grandmother.

In the first part of *Caramelo*, Celaya Reyes remembers a summer trip from Chicago to visit her grandparents in Mexico City in about 1962. With rich imagery and humor and from the perspective of a five-year-old, Celaya introduces her extended family and the culture of Mexico City in the mid twentieth century.

In the second part, with the ghost of her grandmother, Soledad, watching over her shoulder and commenting, an older Celaya recounts Soledad’s

life. This is a story of suffering and hardening against the epic backdrop of twentieth century Mexican history. Celaya explains how Soledad—repeatedly abandoned by parents and her husband—turned into “the Awful Grandmother,” hated and feared by Celaya and her mother because of her fierce possessiveness toward her son, Celaya’s father, Inocencio.

In the final part, Celaya, from a teenager’s perspective, recounts Soledad’s final years, after her husband’s death, when she continued to sow discord in her son’s family. She returns from death to haunt Celaya and threaten Inocencio. In a struggle over Inocencio’s hospital bed after his heart attack, Celaya and the ghost strike a bargain. If Celaya will tell Soledad’s story—as she does in the second part—Soledad will not carry her father away to be with her. Soledad wants her story told because she is suffering alone; she cannot pass on to the next life until those she has hurt can understand her and forgive her.

Soledad’s cruelest act was telling the truth at a carefully chosen moment. Knowing that Inocencio had an illegitimate daughter with her laundress, Soledad brings both mother and child to work in her house while Celaya’s family is visiting. While on an outing, Soledad reveals the truth to Celaya’s mother, hoping that she will leave Inocencio. Celaya does not understand this treachery fully until after her father’s illness, and yet she still is willing to bargain with this “Awful Grandmother” for her father’s life.

In an interview with Ray Suarez of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) network, Cisneros said that in a story, she has the opportunity to think deeply about her characters and to be more forgiving than people are normally. *Caramelo* is, in part, about forgiveness. Her characters often discuss truth and “healthy lies.” Soledad attempts to destroy Celaya’s family by telling the truth. Repeatedly Celaya and various characters find reasons to tell



what they call “healthy lies,” usually the kinds of stories that help people to be kind to one another when closeness is more important than knowing the facts.

Caramelo also develops Cisneros’s typical theme of the young Latina struggling toward becoming an artist within a family and culture that frowns on women choosing nontraditional lives. Celaya’s aspirations are almost thwarted by the values Soledad seems to represent, but finally, they are affirmed when Soledad finds she needs Celaya’s storytelling abilities to free her own voice and ask for mercy.

SUMMARY

While Cisneros’s themes often concern race, gender, and class, her stories and poems are not narrowly political. Rather than focusing on specific social problems and their remedies, Cisneros tries to be part of a more general solution, calling attention through lively and entertaining stories to how life is experienced, especially by Mexican American women. In *Caramelo*, she emphasizes family as a model for humanity, and storytelling as the central means by which universal human interdependence and connectedness become visible. In her stories, she works at changing the ways her readers look at their worlds, helping them to imagine better ways to live. In these ways, her work is related to that of major local color writers of the nineteenth century, such as Sarah Orne Jewett.

Terry Heller

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Loose Woman, 1994

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Sandra Cisneros says that one purpose of her stories is to help readers to see one another more sympathetically and so to be more forgiving. What are some examples of stories and incidents that serve this purpose?
- *Caramelo* opens with this statement: “Tell me something, even if it is a lie.” Think of examples of characters telling stories about themselves and others, whether they are true or false. In which examples is the storytelling hurtful and in which is it helpful? What makes the difference?
- Many of Cisneros’s stories offer comparisons between two or more cultures, especially Anglo-American, Mexican American, and Mexican. What features stand out as distinctive in each culture? What points of comparison does Cisneros emphasize?
- Cisneros’s female characters, especially in *The House on Mango Street* and *Caramelo*, often struggle for self-realization against the expectations for women in traditional Mexican culture. What does traditional Mexican culture expect of women? Consider the motives of her main female rebels against tradition. What factors make their rebellions difficult and painful? What factors go into a successful rebellion?
- Cisneros’s Mexican and Mexican American characters often seem ambivalent about their American Indian ancestry. What are some examples of these ambivalent feelings? What reasons does Cisneros suggest for this ambivalence?
- In several of her stories, Cisneros mixes a good deal of Spanish in with the English. How does this mixing of languages affect the reading experience for an English speaking reader? Why do you think Cisneros does this? For one example, what themes emerge when one studies the meanings and uses of the word “caramelo,” in *Caramelo*?

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