

READING GROUP GUIDE

The House on Mango Street

BY SANDRA CISNEROS

Discussion Questions

1. This story was written as a series of vignettes. Why do you think it was written this way? Did you enjoy this format? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think Cisneros tells the reader about Esperanza's house before she writes about her name? Is Esperanza's house more important than who she is? Why or why not?
3. In English, "Esperanza" means "hope." Does Esperanza's name fit her character? Explain.
4. What is your relationship with your name? Have you ever wished you had a different name? Explain.
5. In what ways do the house and the street influence the characters and events of the story?
6. Cisneros writes about "those who don't know" her neighborhood and the people who live there. What is she saying about the way prejudices and stereotypes shape our perceptions of "us" and "them"? (p.28)
7. How do Esperanza's attitudes about gender and gender roles change throughout the book?
8. In "Red Clowns" (p. 99) the description of what happens to Esperanza is vague, but the images are very strong. What do you think happened to her, and who is to blame?
9. How is language used to divide and include? What does the language you speak suggest about your connection or disconnection to your culture and heritage?
10. From the beginning, Esperanza senses she does not want to end up taking her great-grandmother's "place by the window" (p.11). How does she emotionally and physically separate herself from the other women in the novel?
11. Shoes are a symbol throughout the novel. Consider the scene where Esperanza dances with her Uncle Nacho (p. 47). How are the saddle shoes a metaphor for her life? As an adult, what shoe might she be today? Discuss other instances of shoes being mentioned in the novel.
12. Much of the book details experiences that take place outside of the narrator's house. Why do you think Cisneros chose *The House on Mango Street* as her title?
13. How would *The House on Mango Street* be different if the narrator was a boy?
14. At the end of the novel, Esperanza declares that she is too strong for Mango Street to keep her forever. What is the nature of her strength? Where does Cisneros establish this characteristic elsewhere in the book?



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About the Author

Sandra Cisneros (b. 1954)



Photo by Keith Dannemiller.

Sandra Cisneros is an award winning novelist, poet, essayist, and short story writer. Born in 1954, she grew up as the third child and only girl in a family with seven children. During her childhood, her family moved frequently and sometimes traveled back and forth from Mexico. In 1966, her family moved to Chicago and settled in a house and neighborhood that would later inspire and shape her stories in *The House on Mango Street*.

Though Cisneros began writing as a child, her father believed she should fill a traditional female role by marrying and having children. Her mother, however, nurtured her love of books, getting her a library card before she could even read. She says, "I became a writer not because I went to school but because my mother took me to the library. I wanted to become a writer so I could see my name in the card catalog."

After graduating from high school, Cisneros became a student at Loyola University. "In retrospect, I'm lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English," Cisneros wrote in an essay. She earned her B.A. in English in 1976.

Cisneros was accepted into the Iowa Writer's Workshop after she graduated from college.

She admits she was terribly insecure during her first year in the program, unsure of her own skills and intellect. "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," she said in an interview with *Publisher's Weekly*. Cisneros finally found her own voice by utilizing her past: "I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn't write about."

She earned her master's degree in creative writing and then returned to Chicago where she began work at the Latino Youth Alternative High School for high school dropouts. Meanwhile, she continued writing. Eventually, she received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and completed *The House on Mango Street*. The novel was first published in 1984, and over time, the book received growing recognition, eventually appearing on the required reading lists of major universities and schools throughout the country.

After the success of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros became one of the first Latina writers to receive a major publishing contract. Her collection of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, was published in 1991. She received the MacArthur Genius Fellowship in 1995 and completed her novel *Caramelo*. Her other major works include two poetry collections: *My Wicked Wicked Ways* and *Loose Woman*. She has also written a children's book, *Hair/Pelitos*; a collection of her writing titled *Vintage Cisneros*; a picture book for adults, *Have You Seen Marie?*; *A House of My Own*, a memoir; and *Puro Amor*, a bilingual story that she also illustrated. Her most recent book, *Martita, I Remember You/Martita, te recuerdo*, a story in English and Spanish, will be published in September 2021. Cisneros is a dual citizen of the United States and Mexico and makes her living by her pen.

Through her groundbreaking work and her tireless encouragement of others, Cisneros has motivated readers, writers, young Latinos, and all who understand the power of words. Her voice continues to endure and inspire.

(Adapted from the Park Square Theatre Study Guide)

