



SANDRA CISNEROS

b. 1954, American

Poet and fiction writer Sandra Cisneros grew up in Chicago, the only daughter among the seven children of a Mexican-born father and Mexican-American mother. As a child she moved frequently between the United States and Mexico, spending periods in her father's hometown of Mexico City. As she recalls humorously in one poem, her father envisioned professional careers for all his children,

pointing his sons toward medicine and law but deciding that she would be ideal as a television weather girl. She attended Loyola University in Chicago and is a graduate of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she has said that she first realized that her unique bicultural experiences could "fill a literary void."

*Cisneros's first book was *Bad Boys* (1980), a poetry chapbook from Mango Publications, a small publisher specializing in Chicano writers, and she has since published two other books of poetry, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987) and *Loose Woman* (1994), both of which explore themes of feminism, sexuality, and cultural identity. Her books of fiction include *The House on Mango Street* (1984), which received the *Before Columbus American Book Award* and brought her to the attention of critics and a wider audience, and *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991). *The House on Mango Street* employs an experimental form, consisting of brief sketches and longer stories which use a central protagonist. The compression, rhythms, and imagery of short pieces like "Barbie-Q" are perhaps as close to the spirit of prose poetry as to fiction. *Woman Hollering Creek* uses other experimental devices, including epistolary style and collage.*

Cisneros has taught at a number of universities, including the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Michigan. She has received numerous awards, including a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and, in 1995, a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. She lives in San Antonio, where she owns a home in the King William Historic District.

Barbie-Q

1991

For Licha

Yours is the one with mean eyes and a ponytail. Striped swimsuit, stilettos, sunglasses, and gold hoop earrings. Mine is the one with bubble hair. Red swimsuit, stilettos, pearl earrings, and a wire stand. But that's all we can af-

ford, besides one extra outfit apiece. Yours, "Red Flair," sophisticated A-line coatdress with a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat, white gloves, handbag, and heels included. Mine, "Solo in the Spotlight," evening elegance in black glitter strapless gown with a puffy skirt at the bottom like a mermaid tail, formal-length gloves, pink chiffon scarf, and mike included. From so much dressing and undressing, the black glitter wears off where her titties stick out. This and a dress invented from an old sock when we cut holes here and here and here, the cuff rolled over for the glamorous, fancy-free, off-the-shoulder look.

Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight. You dumbbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not, you stinky! Only Ken's invisible, right? Because we don't have money for a stupid-looking boy doll when we'd both rather ask for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas. We have to make do with your mean-eyed Barbie and my bubblehead Barbie and our one outfit apiece not including the sock dress.

Until next Sunday when we are walking through the flea market on Maxwell Street and *there!* Lying on the street next to some tool bits, and platform shoes with the heels all squashed, and a fluorescent green wicker wastebasket, and aluminum foil, and hubcaps, and a pink shag rug, and windshield wiper blades, and dusty mason jars, and a coffee can full of rusty nails. *There!* Where? Two Mattel boxes. One with the "Career Gal" ensemble, snappy black-and-white business suit, three-quarter-length sleeve jacket with kick-pleat skirt, red sleeveless shell, gloves, pumps, and matching hat included. The other, "Sweet Dreams," dreamy pink-and-white plaid nightgown and matching robe, lace-trimmed slippers, hairbrush and hand mirror included. How much? Please, please, please, please, please, please, until they say okay.

On the outside you and me skipping and humming but inside we are doing loopity-loops and pirouetting. Until at the next vendor's stand, next to boxed pies, and bright orange toilet brushes, and rubber gloves, and wrench sets, and bouquets of feather flowers, and glass towel racks, and steel wool, and Alvin and the Chipmunks records, *there!* And *there!* And *there!* And *there!* and *there!* and *there!* and *there!* Bendable Legs Barbie with her new page-boy hairdo. Midge, Barbie's best friend. Ken, Barbie's boyfriend. Skipper, Barbie's little sister. Tutti and Todd, Barbie and Skipper's tiny twin sister and brother. Skipper's friends, Scooter and Ricky. Alan, Ken's buddy. And Francie, Barbie's MOD'ern cousin.

Everybody today selling toys, all of them damaged with water and smelling of smoke. Because a big toy warehouse on Halsted Street burned down yesterday—see there?—the smoke still rising and drifting across the Dan Ryan expressway. And now there is a big fire sale at Maxwell Street, today only.

So what if we didn't get our new Bendable Legs Barbie and Midge and Ken and Skipper and Tutti and Todd and Scooter and Ricky and Alan and Francie in nice clean boxes and had to buy them on Maxwell Street, all water-soaked and sooty. So what if our Barbies smell like smoke when you hold

them up to your nose even after you wash and wash and wash them. And if the prettiest doll, Barbie's MOD'ern cousin Francie with real eyelashes, eyelash brush included, has a left foot that's melted a little—so? If you dress her in her new “Prom Pinks” outfit, satin splendor with matching coat, gold belt, clutch, and hair bow included, so long as you don't lift her dress, right?—who's to know.

■ AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Sandra Cisneros

Bilingual Style

1992

Interviewer: So what does incorporating the Spanish explicitly do? How does it change things?

Cisneros: What it does is change the rhythm of my writing. I think that incorporating the Spanish, for me, allows me to create new expressions in English—to say things in English that have never been said before. And I get to do that by translating literally. I love calling stories by Spanish expressions. I have this story called “Salvador, Late or Early.” It's a nice title. It means “sooner or later,” *tarde o temprano*, which literally translates as late or early. All of a sudden something happens to the English, something really new is happening, a new spice is added to the English language.

Interviewer: I noticed that one thing you do in the new stories is translate as you go along. You often give a phrase in Spanish and then quickly give maybe a third of it in English.

Cisneros: Sometimes.

Interviewer: Not all of it.

Cisneros: No, I don't have to.

Interviewer: What kinds of choices do you make there?

Cisneros: That's the fun part! See, sometimes you don't have to say the whole thing. Now I'm learning how you can say something in English so that you know the person is saying it in Spanish. I like that. You can say a phrase in Spanish, and you can chose to not translate it, but you can make it understood through the context. “And then my *abuelita* called me a *sin verguenza* and cried because I am without shame,” you see? Just in the sentence you can weave it in. To me it's really fun to be doing that; to me it's like I've uncovered this whole motherlode that I haven't tapped into. All the *expresiones* in Spanish when translated make English wonderful. I feel like I haven't finished playing around. I just feel so rich, as though you've given me all this new territory and said, “Okay, you can go in there and play.”

Interviewer: . . . In terms of playing with the two languages, do you have an eye on a reader who doesn't know Spanish or are you writing to people who will be able to go back and forth with you from language to language?

Cisneros: The readers who are going to like my stories the best and catch all the subtexts and all the subtleties, that even my editor can't catch, are Chicanas. When there are Chicanas in the audience and they laugh, they are

laughing at stuff that we talk about among ourselves. And there's no way that my editor at Random House is ever going to get those jokes. But I also am very conscious when I'm writing about opening doors for people who don't know the culture. I try my best. I won't do it for the sake of an Anglo reader. There was one place in my story when, for example, the grandmother cried because she found out I was going to "*dar a luz*." My editor finally put in the margins, "I think you need to translate this." I said, "I wish I could, but I don't know how without the seams showing, so we're going to have to leave it. People will have to use a dictionary; they can still get it." I really feel that way. I'm not going to make concessions to the non-Spanish speaker. I will try my best everywhere else if it flows into the piece, but if the seam is showing and it's obvious that the character is saying something like, "the grandmother cried because I was going to *dar a luz*, I was going to give birth," that's clumsy. I'm not going to do that for the person who's monolingual, but I will try to weave it in in such a way in the rest of the story so they don't lose it.

Interview with Reed Way Dasenbrock