

On Writing *The House on Mango Street* (1994)

By Sandra Cisneros

It's been ten years since *The House on Mango Street* was first published. I began writing it in graduate school, the spring of 1977, in Iowa City. I was twenty-two years old.

I'm thirty-eight now, far from that time and place, but the questions from readers remain, Are these stories true? Are you Esperanza?

When I began *The House on Mango Street*, I thought I was writing a memoir. By the time I finished it, my memoir was no longer memoir, no longer autobiographical. It had evolved into a collective story peopled with several lives from my past and present, placed in one fictional time and neighborhood—Mango Street.

A story is like a Giacometti sculpture. The farther away it is from you, the clearer you can see it. In Iowa City, I was undergoing several changes of identity. For the first time I was living alone, in a community very different in class and culture from the one where I was raised. This caused so much unrest I could barely speak, let alone write about it. The story I was living at twenty-two would have to wait, but I could take the story of an earlier place, an earlier voice, and record that on paper.

The voice of *Mango Street* and all my work was born at one moment, when I realized I was different. This sounds absurd and simple, but until Iowa City, I assumed the world was like Chicago, made up of people of many cultures all living together—albeit not happily at times but still coexisting. In Iowa, I was suddenly aware of feeling odd when I spoke, as if I were a foreigner. But this was my land too. This is not to say I hadn't felt this "otherness" before in Chicago, but I hadn't felt it quite as keenly as I did in graduate school. I couldn't articulate what it was that was happening, except I knew I felt ashamed when I spoke in class, so I chose not to speak.

I can say my political consciousness began the moment I recognized my otherness. I was in graduate seminar on memory and the imagination. The books required were Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak Memory*, Isak Dinensen's *Out of Africa*, and Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. I had enjoyed the first two, but as usual I said nothing, just listened to the dialogue around me, too afraid to speak. The third book, though, left me baffled. I assumed I just didn't get it because I wasn't as smart as everyone else, and if I didn't say anything, maybe no one would notice.

The conversation, I remember, was about the house of memory—the attic, the stairwells, the cellar. Attic? My family lived in third-floor flats for the most part, because noise traveled down. Stairwells reeked of Pine Sol from the Saturday scrubbing. We shared them with the people downstairs; they were public zones no one except us thought to clean. We mopped them all right, but not without resentment for cleaning up other people's trash. And as for cellars, we had a basement, but who'd want to hide in there? Basements were filled with urban fauna. Everyone was scared to go there including the meter reader and the landlord. What was this guy Bachelard talking about when he mentioned the familiar and comforting house of memory? It was obvious he never had to clean one or pay the landlord rent for one like ours.

Then it occurred to me that none of the books in this class or in any of my classes, in all the years of my education, had ever discussed a house like mine. Not in books or

magazines or films. My classmates had come from real houses, real neighborhoods, ones they could point to, but what did I know?

When I went home that evening and realized my education had been a lie—had made presumptions about what was “normal,” what was American, what was valuable—I wanted to quit school right then and there, but I didn’t. Instead, I got angry, and anger when it is used to act, when it is used nonviolently, has power. I asked myself what I could write about that my classmates could not. I didn’t know what I wanted exactly, but I did have enough sense to know what I *didn’t* want. I didn’t want to sound like my classmates; I didn’t want to keep imitating the writers I had been reading. Their voices were right for *them* but not for *me*.

Instead, I searched for the “ugliest” subjects I could find, the most un “poetic”—slang, monologues in which waitresses or kids talked their own lives. I was trying as best I could to write the kind of book I had *never* seen in a library or in a school, the kind of book not even my professors could write. Each week I ingested the class readings and then went off and did the opposite. It was a quiet revolution, perhaps a reaction taken to extremes, but it was out of this negative experience that I found something positive: my own voice.

The language in *Mango Street* is based on speech. It’s very much an antiacademic voice—a child’s voice, a girl’s voice, a poor girl’s voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican. It’s in this rebellious realm of antipoetics that I tried to create a poetic text with the most unofficial language I could find. I did it neither ingenuously nor naturally. It was as clear to me as if I were tossing a Molotov.

At one time or another, we all have felt other. When I teach writing, I tell the story of the moment of discovering and naming my otherness. It is not enough simply to sense it; it has to be named, and then written about from there. Once I could name it, I ceased being ashamed and silent. I could speak up and celebrate my otherness as a woman, as a working-class person, as an American of Mexican descent. When I recognized the places where I departed from my neighbors, my classmates, my family, my town, my brothers, when I discovered what I knew that no one else in the room knew, and then spoke it in a voice that was my voice, the voice I used when I was sitting in the kitchen, dressed in my pajamas, talking over a table littered with cups and dishes, when I could give myself permission to speak from that intimate space, then I could talk and sound like myself, not like me trying to sound like someone I wasn’t. Then I could speak, shout, laugh from a place that was uniquely mine, that was no one else’s in the history of the universe, that would never be anyone else’s, ever.

I wrote these stories that way, guided by my heart and by my ear. I was writing a novel and didn’t know I was writing a novel; if I had, I probably couldn’t have done it. I knew I wanted to tell a story made up of a series of stories that would make sense if read alone, or that could be read all together to tell one big story, each story contributing to the whole—like beads in a necklace. I hadn’t seen a book like this before. I remember I was trying to write something that was a cross between fiction and poetry—like Jorge Luis Borges’ *Dream Tigers*, a book whose stories read like fables, but with the lyricism and succinctness of poetry.

I finished writing my book in November 1982, miles from the Iowa cornfields. I had traveled a great distance both physically and mentally from the book’s inception. And in the meantime, lots of things happened to me. I taught Latino high-school

dropouts and counseled Latina students. Because I often felt helpless as a teacher and counselor to alter their lives, their stories began to surface in my “memoir”; then *Mango Street* ceased to be my story. I arranged and diminished events on Mango Street to speak a message, to take from different parts of other people’s lives and create a story like a collage. I merged characters from my twenties with characters from my teens and childhood. I edited, changed, shifted the past to fit the present. I asked questions I didn’t know to ask when I was an adolescent. But best of all, writing in a younger voice allowed me to name that thing without a name, that shame of being poor, of being female, of being not quite good enough, and examine where it had come from and why, so I could exchange shame for celebration.

I had never been trained to think of poems or stories as something that could change someone’s life. I had been trained to think about where a line ended or how best to work a metaphor. It was always the “how” and not the “what” we talked about in class. Even while I was teaching in the Chicago community, the two halves of my life were at odds with each other—the half that wanted to roll up my sleeves and do something for the community, and the half that wanted to retreat to my kitchen and write. I still believed my writing couldn’t save anyone’s life but my own.

In the ten years since *Mango Street* has been published, those two halves of my life have met and merged. I believe this because I’ve witnessed families buying my book for themselves and for family members, families for whom spending money on a book can be a sacrifice. Often they bring a mother, father, sibling, or cousin along to my readings, or I am introduced to someone who says their son or daughter read my book in class and brought it home for them. And there are the letters from readers of all ages and colors who write to say I have written their story. The raggedy state of my books that some readers and educators hand me to sign is the best compliment of all. These are my affirmations and blessings.